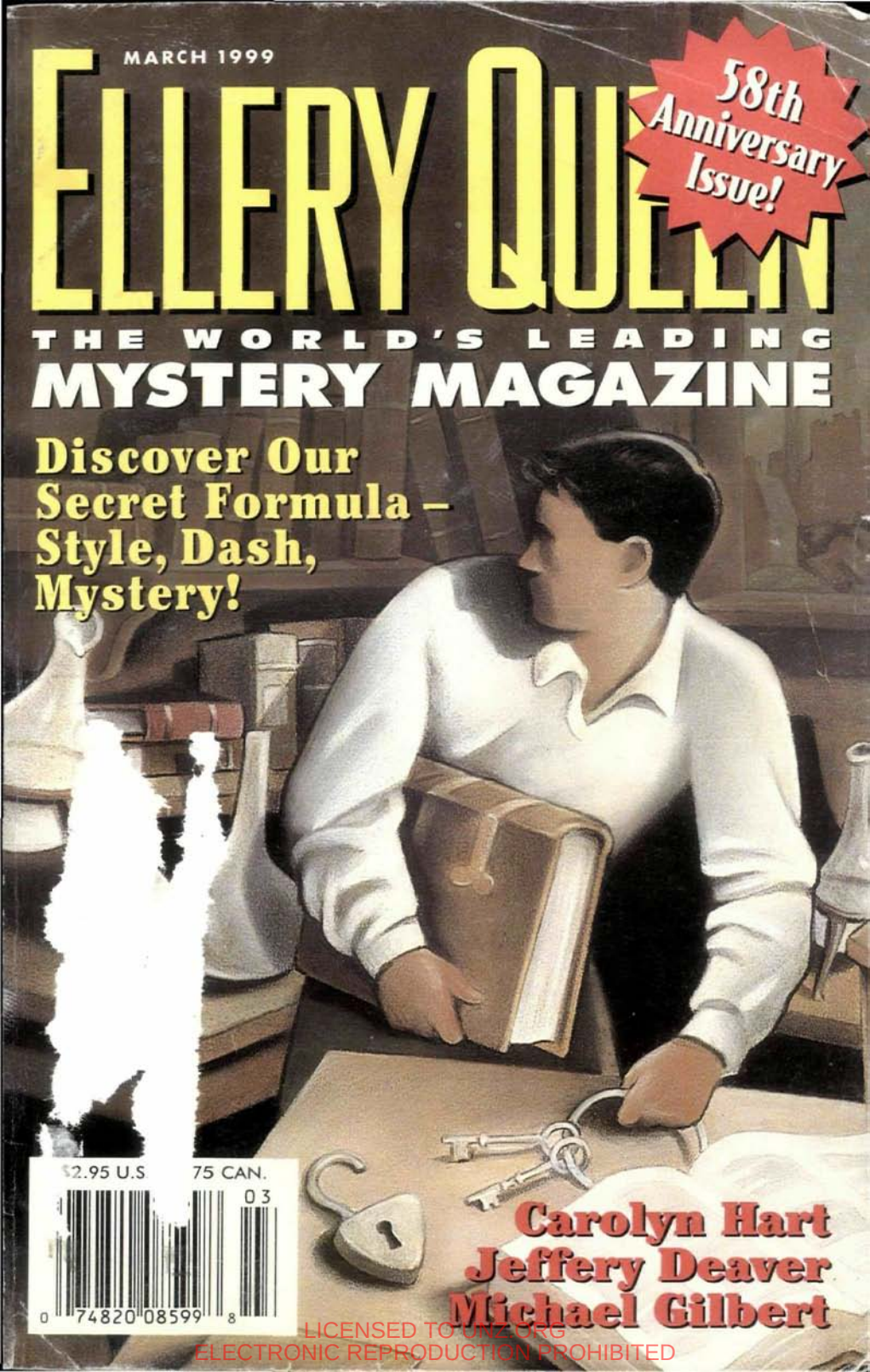
MARCH 1999

ELLERY QUEEN

58th Anniversary Issue!

THE WORLD'S LEADING
MYSTERY MAGAZINE

Discover Our Secret Formula – Style, Dash, Mystery!



$2.95 U.S 75 CAN.
03
0 74820 08599 8

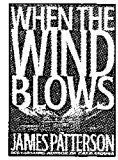
Carolyn Hart
Jeffery Deaver
Michael Gilbert

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

The Cat's Out of the Bag

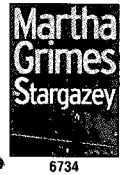
Word's gotten around—*Mystery Guild*® has the best mysteries at *purr*-fect prices. Clip the coupon and join us today!

6494
~~$17.00~~/$9.98

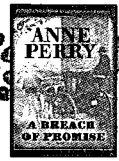


0570
~~$25.00~~/$13.48

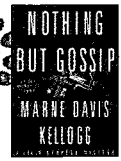
6205
~~$24.95~~/$12.48



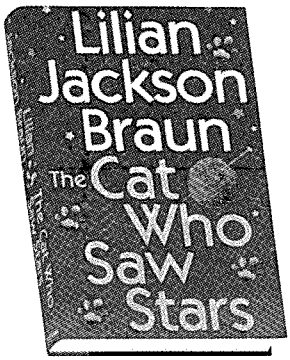
6734
~~$25.00~~/$12.48



6742
~~$25.00~~/$12.48

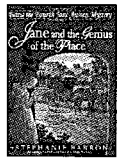


1230
~~$21.95~~/$10.98

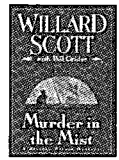


6718 ~~$22.95~~/$12.48

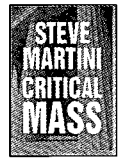
6932*
~~$22.95~~/$11.48



2246
~~$22.95~~/$11.48

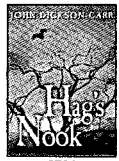


1420
~~$23.95~~/$11.98



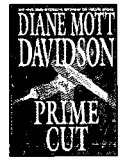
6403
~~$25.95~~/$12.98

1560
~~$24.95~~/$12.98



6791
Spec. Ed. $10.98

6155
~~$22.95~~/$11.48



6197
~~$23.95~~/$12.98

7 REASONS TO JOIN NOW...

1. Joining is easy. Start with **6 books for 99¢**. Your bill (including shipping and handling) will come when membership is confirmed. We'll also send your FREE *Mystery Guild*® FREE Shoulder Tote. **2. Your satisfaction is guaranteed.** If you're not happy with your books, return them within 10 days *at our expense*. Your membership will be canceled; you'll owe nothing. The FREE Tote is yours to keep as our "thank you" for trying us. **3. Save up to 60% off** publishers' hardcover edition prices. Just pick at least 4 more books at our regular low prices during your membership. Take up to 2 years! Then you may resign any time. **4. Extra bonus!** Take a 7th book now for $3.99, plus shipping and handling, and reduce your membership agreement to only 3 books. **5. A FREE Club Magazine** comes to you up to 17 times a year—plus up to 2 special issues. Each reviews the Featured Book Selections and dozens of alternate books. Some are exclusive Club editions you won't find anywhere else. **6. Ordering is risk free.** Featured Book Selections are sent to you automatically. To cancel—or order other books—simply send in your Member Reply Form by mail or contact our Web site by the marked date. Shipping and handling (plus sales tax, where applicable) is added to each order. You'll always have 10 days to decide. If your Member Reply Form is late and unwanted books arrive, please return them *at our expense*. **7. Easy ordering** through the mail or via our Web site: **www.MysteryGuild.com**.

FREE TOTE
with membership

* Explicit scenes and/or language
Prices in fine print are for publishers' editions.
Prices in bold print are for Club hardcover editions.

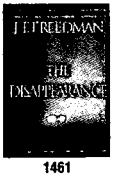
E304

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

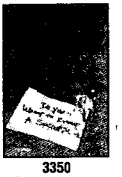
2386
~~$29.95~~/$11.98

6882*
~~$29.95~~/$11.98

6957
~~$24.95~~/$10.98

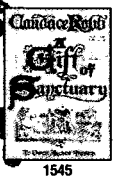


1461
~~$24.95~~/$12.48



3350
~~$29.95~~/$11.98

6866*
~~$29.95~~/$14.40

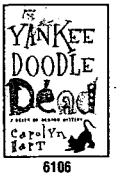


1545
~~$22.95~~/$11.48

2949
Spec. Ed. $9.98

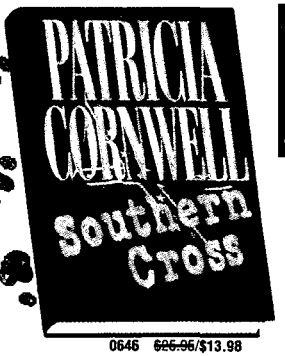
6239*
~~$24.00~~/$11.98

6700
~~$24.00~~/$11.98

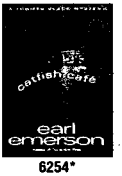


6106
~~$21.00~~/$10.48

6577
~~$25.00~~/$12.48

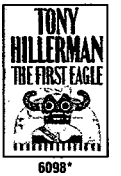


0646 ~~$26.95~~/$13.98



6254*
~~$22.00~~/$10.98

5983*
~~$20.00~~/$13.98



6098*
~~$25.00~~/$12.48

6965
Spec. Ed. $9.98

Take 6 mysteries for 99¢

with membership

MYSTERY GUILD

www.MysteryGuild.com

MAIL TO: *Mystery Guild®*
6550 East 30th Street
P.O. Box 6362
Indianapolis, IN 46206-6362

Please write book numbers here:

19

YES! Please enroll me in *Mystery Guild®* according to the risk-free membership plan described in this ad. Send me the 6 BOOKS I've indicated. Bill me just 99¢, plus shipping and handling. Also, send my FREE SHOULDER TOTE.

SAVE EVEN MORE! Send me this book now and reduce my commitment to 3 books. Bill me an added $3.99, plus shipping and handling.

(write book number)

PT284 15

Mr./Mrs.

Miss/Ms. _____
(please print)

Address _____ Apt. _____

City _____ State _____ ZIP _____

Telephone, please (_____) _____

Members accepted in U.S.A. and Canada only. Canadian members serviced from Canada, where offer is slightly different. Sales tax added where applicable. We reserve the right to reject any application.

EQM 3/99

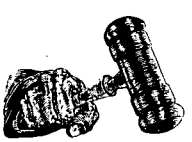
LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

CONTENTS

Murder to music
Page 74

A run for the money
Page 94

Cover Illustration by
Scott Hodgdon



Dell Magazines
475 Park Avenue South
New York, NY 10016

Note: indicia on
page 143

FICTION

Spooked
BY CAROLYN HART 4

The Theft of the Birthday Candles
BY EDWARD D. HOCH 20

Her Mother's Secrets
BY KRISTINE KATHRYN RUSCH 38

A View of the Sea
BY CARMEN IARRERA 58

The Sweet Singer of 33-A
BY CYNTHIA LAWRENCE 74

Gun Control
BY WILLIAM BANKIER 84

The Message of the Stars
BY MICHAEL GILBERT 94

Nest
BY PETER TURNBULL 105

The Most Beautiful Woman on Staten Island
BY LAURENCE M. JANIFER 116

Triangle
BY JEFFERY DEAVER 128

REVIEWS

The Jury Box BY JON L. BREEN 35

FIRST STORIES

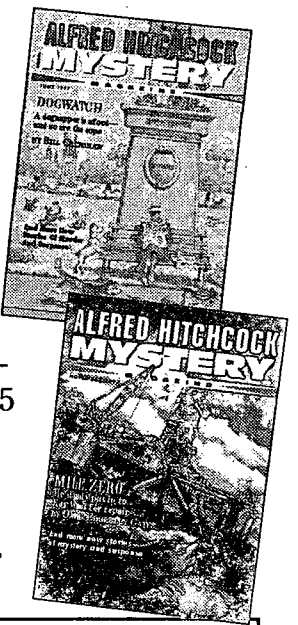
Blank Check
BY DAVID TERRENOIRE 63

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

MYSTERY VALUE PACK

5 magazines for just $8.95!

Give yourself ***chills*** with our value pack of 5 best-loved issues of **Alfred Hitchcock Mystery Magazine!**



You'll enjoy dozens of captivating tales from world-renowned masters of suspense and talented new writers alike — all for just $8.95 plus shipping. You save 40% off the regular price.

It's easy to order. Just fill out the coupon below and mail it to us with your payment. *Your satisfaction is fully guaranteed!*

PENNY MARKETING

Dept. SM-100, 6 Prowitt Street, Norwalk, CT 06855-1220

☐ **YES!** Please send me my **Alfred Hitchcock Mystery Magazine Value Pack**. I get 5 entertaining issues for just $8.95 plus $3 shipping and handling ($11.95 per pack, U.S. funds). My satisfaction is fully guaranteed! My payment of $_____ is enclosed.(AHPK05)

Name: _____
(Please print)

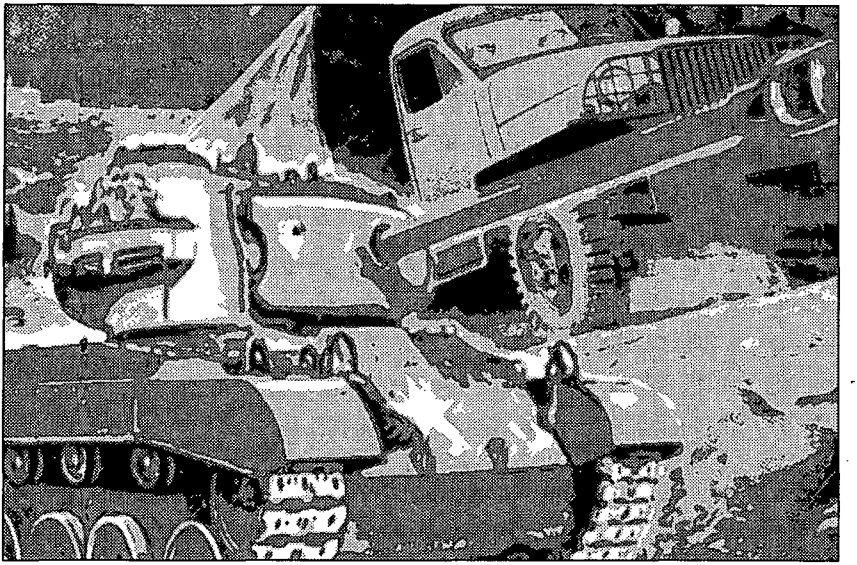
Address: _____

City: _____

State: _____ **ZIP:** _____

Please make checks payable to Penny Marketing. Allow 8 weeks for delivery. Magazines are back issues shipped together in one package. To keep prices low we cannot make custom orders. Add $4 additional postage for delivery outside the U.S.A. Offer expires 6/30/99. 088C-NQHVLL

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED



SPOOKED

by Carolyn Hart

The dust from the convoy rose in plumes. Gretchen stood on tiptoe, waving, waving.

A soldier leaned over the tailgate of the olive-drab troop carrier. The blazing July sun touched his crew cut with gold. He grinned as he tossed her a bubble gum. "Chew it for me, kid."

Gretchen wished she could run alongside, give him some of Grandmother Lotte's biscuits and honey. But his truck was twenty feet away and another one rumbled in front of her. She ran a few steps, called out, "Good luck. Good luck!" The knobby piece of gum was a precious lump in her hand.

She stood on the edge of the highway until the last truck passed. Grandmother said Highway 66 went all the way to California and the soldiers were on their way to big ships to sail across the ocean to fight the Japs. Gretchen wished she could do something for the war. Her brother Jimmy was a Marine, somewhere in the South Pacific. He'd survived Iwo Jima. Every month they sent him cookies, peanut butter and oatmeal raisin and spice, packed in popcorn. When they had enough precious sugar, they made Aunt Bill's

©1999 by Carolyn Hart

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

candy, but Mom had to find the sugar in Tulsa. Mr. Hudson's general store here in town almost never had sacks of sugar. Every morning she and Grandmother sat in a front pew of the little frame church in the willows and prayed for Jimmy and for all the boys overseas and for Gretchen's mom working so hard at the defense plant in Tulsa. Her mom only came home about one weekend a month. Grandmother tried to save a special piece of meat when she could. Grandmother said her mom was thin as a rail and working too hard, but Gretchen knew it was important for her mom to work. They needed everybody to help, and Mom was proud that she put radio parts in the big B-24 Liberators.

Carolyn Hart's new story was written for an upcoming anthology, *Murder on Route 66* (1/2000)—a book of mysteries set along that highway. Ms. Hart told us that she knew the old Rte. 66 from having grown up in Oklahoma City. She "often made the long, hot drive to L.A. shortly after the war... {and} remembers window air conditioners in cars, and the Burma shave signs across the desert."

Gretchen took a deep breath of the hot heavy air, still laced with dust, and walked across the street to the cafe. Ever since the war started, they'd been busy from early morning until they ran out of food, sometimes around five o'clock, never later than seven. Of course, they had special ration books for the cafe, but Grandmother said they couldn't use those points to get sugar for Jimmy. That wouldn't be right.

Gretchen shaded her eyes and looked at the plate-glass window. She still felt a kind of thrill when she saw the name painted in bright blue: Victory Cafe. A thrill, but also a tightness in her chest, the kind of feeling she once had when she climbed the big sycamore to get the calico kitten and a branch snapped beneath her feet. For an instant that seemed to last forever, she was falling. She whopped against a thick limb and held on tight. She remembered the sense of strangeness as she fell. And disbelief, the thought that this couldn't be happening to her. There was a strangeness in the cafe's new name. It had been Pfizer's Cafe for almost twenty years, but now it didn't do to be proud of being German. Now Grandmother didn't say much in the cafe because her accent was thick. She was careful not to say "ja" and she let Gretchen do most of the talking. Grandmother prayed for Jimmy and for her sister's family in Hamburg.

Gretchen tucked the bubblegum in the pocket of her pedal pushers. Grandmother wouldn't let her wear shorts even though it was so hot the cotton stuck to her legs. She glanced at the big ther-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

mometer hanging by the door. Ninety-eight degrees and just past one o'clock. They'd sure hit over a hundred today, just like every day for the past few weeks. They kept the front door propped open, hoping for a little breeze through the screen.

The cafe was almost as much her home as the boxy three-bedroom frame house a half-mile away down a dirt road. Her earliest memories were playing with paper dolls in a corner of the kitchen as her mother and grandmother worked hard and fast, fixing country breakfasts for truck drivers in a hurry to get to Tulsa and on to Oklahoma City and Amarillo with their big rigs. Every morning, grizzled old men from around the county gathered at Pfizer's for their newspapers and gossip as well as rashers of bacon, a short stack, and scrambled eggs. But everything changed with the war. Camp Crowder, just over the line in Missouri, brought in thousands of soldiers. Of course, they were busy training, but there were always plenty of khaki uniforms in the Victory Cafe now even though the menu wasn't what it had been before the war. Now they had meatless Tuesdays and Grandmother fixed huge batches of macaroni and cheese. Sometimes there wasn't any bacon, but they had scrambled eggs and grits and fried potatoes. Instead of roast beef, they had hash, the potatoes and meat bubbly in a vinegary sauce. But Grandmother never fixed red cabbage or sauerkraut anymore.

It was up to Gretchen to help her grandmother when her mom moved to Tulsa. She might only be twelve, but she was wiry and strong and she promised herself she'd never complain, not once, not ever, not for the duration. That's what everybody talked about, the duration until someday the war was over. On summer evenings she was too tired to play kick the can and it seemed a long-ago memory when she used to climb up into the maple tree, carrying a stack of movie magazines, and nestle with her back to the trunk and legs dangling.

She gave a swift, professional glance around the square room. The counter with red leatherette stools was to the left. The mirror behind the counter sparkled. She'd stood on a stool to polish it after lunch. Now it reflected her: black pigtails, a skinny face with blue eyes that often looked tired and worried, and a pink Ship 'n Shore blouse and green pedal pushers. Her blouse had started the day crisp and starched, but now it was limp and spattered with bacon grease.

Four tables sat in the center. Three wooden booths ran along the back wall and two booths to the right. The jukebox was tucked between the back booths and the swinging door to the kitchen. It was almost always playing. She loved "Stardust" and "Chattanooga Choo-Choo," but the most often played song was "Praise the Lord and Pass the Ammunition." A poster on the wall beside the jukebox pictured a sinking ship and a somber Uncle Sam with

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

a finger to his lips and the legend: LOOSE LIPS SINK SHIPS. Grandmother told her it meant no one should talk about the troop convoys that went through on Highway 66 or where they were going, or talk about soldiers' letters that sometimes carried information that got past the censors. Grandmother said that's why they had to be so careful about the food, to make sure there was enough for Jimmy and all the other boys. And that's why they couldn't drive to Tulsa to see Mom. There wasn't enough gas. Grandmother said even a cupful of gas might make a difference one day whether some boy—like Jimmy—lived or died.

Two of the front tables needed clearing. But she made a circuit of the occupied places first.

Deputy Sheriff Carter flicked his cigar and ash dribbled onto his paunch, which started just under his chin and pouched against the edge of the table. He frowned at black and white squares on the newspaper page. He looked at Mr. Hudson across the table. "You know a word for mountain ridge? Five letters." He chewed on his pencil. "Oh, yeah," he murmured. He marked the letters, closed the paper, leaned back in the booth. "Heard they been grading a road out near the McLemore place."

Mr. Hudson clanked his spoon against the thick white coffee mug. "Got some more java, Gretchen?"

She nodded.

Mr. Hudson pursed his thin mouth. "Bud McLemore's son-in-law's a county commissioner, Euel. What do you expect?"

Gretchen hurried to the hot plates behind the counter, brought the steaming coffeepot, and refilled both men's mugs.

The deputy sheriff's face looked like an old ham, crusted and pink. "Never no flies on Bud. Maybe my youngest girl'll get herself a county commissioner. 'Course, she spends most of her time at the USO in Tulsa. But she's makin' good money at the Douglas plant. Forty dollars a week." Then he frowned. "But it's sure givin' her big ideas."

Gretchen moved on to the next booth, refilled the cups for some army officers who had a map spread out on the table.

The younger officer looked just like Alan Ladd. "I've got it marked in a grid, sir. Here's the last five places they spotted the Spooklight."

The bigger man fingered his little black moustache. "Lieutenant, I want men out in the field every night. We're damn well going to get to the bottom of this business."

Gretchen took her time moving away. The Spooklight. Everybody in town knew the army had set up a special camp about six miles out of town just to look for the Spooklight, those balls of orange or white that rose from nowhere and flowed up and down hills, hung like fiery globes in the scrawny bois d'arc trees, some-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

times ran right up on porches or over barns. Some people said the bouncing globes of light were a reflection from the headlights on Highway 66. Other folks scoffed, because the lights had been talked about for a hundred years, long before cars moved on the twisting road.

Gretchen put the coffee on the hot plate, picked up a damp cloth and a tray. She set to work on the table closest to the army officers.

". . . Sergeant Ferris swore this light was big as a locomotive and it came rolling and bouncing down the road, went right over the truck like seltzer water bouncing in a soda glass. Now, you can't tell me," the black moustache bristled, "that burning gas acts like that."

"No, sir." The lieutenant sounded just like Cornel Wilde saluting a general in that movie about the fall of Corregidor.

The kitchen door squeaked open. Her grandmother's red face, naturally ruddy skin flushed with heat from the stove, brightened and she smiled. But she didn't say a word. When Gretchen was little, she would have caroled, *"Komm her, mein Schatz."* Now she waved her floury hands.

Gretchen carried the dirty dishes into the kitchen. The last words she heard were like an Abbott and Costello radio show, a nonsensical mixture, ". . . soon as the war's over . . . set up search parties . . . I'm gonna see if I can patch those tires . . . good training for night . . ."

Four pies sat on the kitchen's center table, steam still rising from the latticed crusts. The smell of apples and cinnamon and a hint of nutmeg overlay the onions and liver and fried okra cooked for lunch.

"Oh, Grandmother." Gretchen's eyes shone. Apple pie was her favorite food in all the world. Then, without warning, she felt the hot prick of tears. Jimmy loved apple pie, too.

Grandmother's big blue eyes were suddenly soft. She was heavy and moved slowly, but her arms soon enveloped Gretchen. "No tears. Tomorrow ve send Jimmy a stollen rich with our own pecans. Now, let's take our pies to the counter. But first," she used a sharp knife, cut a generous wedge, scooped it out, and placed it on a plate, "I haf saved one piece—ein—for you."

The pie plates were still warm. Gretchen held the door for her grandmother. It was almost like a festive procession as they carried the pies to the counter.

The officers watched. Mr. Hudson's nose wrinkled in pleasure. Deputy Carter pointed at a pie plate. "Hey, Lotte, I'll sure take one of those." There was a chorus of calls.

Grandmother dished up the pieces, handing the plates to Gretchen, then stood at the end of the counter, sprigs of silver-streaked blond hair loose from her coronet braids, her blue eyes

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

happy, her plump hands folded on her floury apron. Gretchen refilled all the coffee cups.

Grandmother was behind the cash register when Mr. Hudson paid his check. "Lotte, the deputy may have to put you in jail, you make any more pies like that."

Grandmother's face was suddenly still. She looked at him in bewilderment.

Mr. Hudson cackled. "You sure don't have enough sugar to make that many pies. You been dealing in the black market?"

Grandmother's hands shook as she held them up, as if to stop a careening horse. "Oh, nein, ne—no, no. Not black market. Never. I use honey, honey my cousin Ernst makes himself."

The officers were waiting with their checks. The younger blond man, the one who looked like Alan Ladd, smiled warmly. *"Sprechen Sie Deustch? Dies ist der beste Apfelkuchen den ich je gegessen habe."*

The deputy tossed down a quarter, a dime, and a nickel for macaroni and cheese, cole slaw, pie, and coffee. He glowered at Grandmother. "No Heinie talk needed around here. That right, Lotte?" He glared at the soldier. "How come you speak it so good?"

The blond officer was a much smaller man, but Gretchen loved the way he looked at the deputy as if he were a piece of banana peel. "Too bad you don't have a German *Großmutter* like she and I do." He nodded toward Gretchen. "We're lucky, you know," and he gave Grandmother a gentle smile. *"Danke schön."*

But Grandmother's shoulders were drawn tight. She made the change without another word, not looking at any of the men, and when they turned toward the front door, she scuttled to the kitchen.

Gretchen waited a moment, then darted after her.

Grandmother stood against the back wall, her apron to her face, her shoulders shaking.

"Don't cry, Grandmother." Now it was Gretchen who stood on tiptoe to hug the big woman.

Her grandmother wiped her face and said, her accent even more pronounced than usual, "Ve haf vork to do. Enough now."

As her grandmother stacked the dirty dishes in the sink, Gretchen took a clean recipe card. She searched through the file, then printed in large block letters:

LOTTE'S APPLE HONEY VICTORY PIE
6 tart apples
1 cup honey
2 tbs. flour
1 tsp. cinnamon
dash nutmeg
dash salt
pastry

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

She took the card and propped it by the cash register.

Back in the kitchen, Grandmother scrubbed the dishes in hot soapy water then hefted a teakettle to pour boiling water over them as they drained. Gretchen mopped the floor. Every so often, the bell jangled from the front and Gretchen hurried out to take an order.

The pie and all the food was gone before five. Grandmother turned the sign in the front window to CLOSED. Then she walked wearily to the counter and picked up the recipe Gretchen had scrawled.

"Let's leave it there, Grandmother." Gretchen was surprised at how stern she sounded.

Her grandmother almost put it down, then shook her head. "Ve don't vant to make the deputy mad, Gretchen."

Gretchen hated hearing the fear in Grandmother's voice. She wanted to insist that the recipe remain. She wanted to say that they hadn't done anything wrong and they shouldn't have to be afraid. But she didn't say anything else as her grandmother held the card tight to her chest and turned away.

"You go on home, Grandmother. I'll close up." Gretchen held up her hands as her grandmother started to protest. "You know I like to close up." She'd made a game of it months ago because she knew Grandmother was so tired by closing time that she almost couldn't walk the half-mile to the house, and there was still the garbage to haul down to the incinerator and the menus to stack and silverware to roll up in the clean gingham napkins and potatoes to scrub for tomorrow and the jam and jelly jars to be wiped with a hot rag.

Gretchen made three trips to the incinerator, hauling the trash in a wheelbarrow. She liked the creak of the wheel and the caw of the crows and even though it was so hot she felt like an egg on a sizzling griddle, it was fun to use a big kitchen match and set the garbage on fire. She had to stay until she could stir the ashes, be sure the fire was out. She tipped the wheelbarrow over and stood on it to reach up and catch a limb and climb the big cottonwood. She climbed high enough to look out over the town, at the cafe and at McGrory's gas station and at the flag hanging limp on the pole outside the post office.

If it hadn't been for the ugly way the deputy had acted to Grandmother, Gretchen probably would never have paid any attention to him. But he'd been mean, and she glowered at him through the shifting leaves of the cottonwood.

He didn't see her, of course. He was walking along the highway. A big truck zoomed over the hill. When the driver spotted the deputy's high-crowned black hat and khaki uniform, he abruptly slowed. But the deputy wasn't paying any attention, he was just

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

strolling along, his hands in his pockets, almost underneath Gretchen's tree.

A hot day for a walk. Too hot a day for a walk. Gretchen wiped her sticky face against the collar of her blouse. She craned for a better look. Oh, the deputy was turning into the graveyard nestled on the side of the hill near the church. The graveyard was screened from most of the town by a stand of enormous evergreens, so only Gretchen and the crows could see past the mossy stone pillars and the metal arch.

Gretchen frowned and remembered the time when Mrs. Whittle caught Sammy Cooper out in the hall without a pass. She'd never forgotten the chagrin on Sammy's face when Mrs. Whittle said, "Samuel, the next time you plan to cut class, don't walk like you have the Hope diamond in your pocket and there's a policeman on every corner." Gretchen wasn't sure what the Hope diamond was, but every time any of the kids saw Sammy for the next year, they'd whistle and shout, "Got the Hope diamond, Sammy?"

The deputy stopped in a huge swath of shade from an evergreen. He peered around the graveyard. What did he expect to see? Nobody there could look at him.

Gretchen forgot how hot she was. She even forgot to be mad. She leaned forward and grabbed the closest limb, moved it so she could see better.

The deputy made a full circle of the graveyard, which was maybe half as big as a football field, no more than forty or fifty headstones. He passed by the stone angel at Grandpa Pfizer's grave and her dad's stone that had a weeping willow on it. That was the old part of the cemetery. A mossy stone, half fallen on one side, marked the grave of a Confederate soldier. Mrs. Peters took Gretchen's social studies class there last year and showed them how to do a rubbing of a stone even though the inscription was scarcely legible. Gretchen shivered when she saw the wobbly, indistinct gray letters: Hiram Kelly, age 19, wounded July 17, 1863 in the Battle of Honey Springs, died July 29, 1863. Beloved Son of Robert and Effie Kelly, Cherished Brother of Corinne Kelly. Some of the graves still had little American flags, placed there for the Fourth. A half-dozen big sprays marked the most recent grave.

Back by the pillars, the deputy made one more careful study of the church and the graveyard, then he pulled a folded sheet of paper from his pocket and knelt by the west pillar. He tugged at a stone about three inches from the ground.

Gretchen couldn't believe her eyes. She leaned so far forward her branch creaked.

The kneeling man's head jerked up.

Gretchen froze quieter than a tick on a dog.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

The sun glistened on his face, giving it an unhealthy, coppery glow. The eyes that skittered over the headstones and probed the lengthening shadows were dark and dangerous.

A crow cawed. A heavy truck rumbled over the hill, down Main Street. The faraway wail of Cal Burke's saxophone sounded sad and lonely.

Gradually, the tension eased out of the deputy's shoulders. He turned and jammed the paper into the small dark square and poked the stone over the opening, like capping a jar of preserves. He lunged to his feet and strode out of the cemetery, relaxing to a casual saunter once past the church.

Gretchen waited until he climbed into his old black Ford and drove down the dusty road.

She swung down from the tree, thumped onto the wheelbarrow, and jumped to the ground. The bells in the steeple rang six times. She had to hurry. Grandmother would have a light supper ready, pork and beans and a salad with her homemade Thousand Island dressing and a big slice of watermelon.

Gretchen tried not to look like she had the Hope diamond in her pocket. Instead, she whistled as though calling a dog and clapped her hands. A truck roared past on its way north to Joplin. Still whistling, she ran to the stone posts. Once hidden from the road, she worked fast. The oblong slab of stone came right off in her hand. She pulled out the sheet of paper, unfolded it.

She'd had geography last spring with Mrs. Jacobs. She'd made an A. She liked maps, liked the way you could take anything, a mountain, a road, an ocean, and make it come alive on a piece of paper.

She figured this one at a glance. The straight line—though really the road curved and climbed and fell—was Highway 66. The little squiggle slanting off to the northeast from McGrory's station was the dusty road that led to an abandoned zinc mine, the Sister Sue. The X was a little off the road, just short of the mine entrance. There was a round clock face at the top of the sheet. The hands were set at midnight.

She stuffed the folded sheet in its dark space, replaced the stone. X marks the spot. Not a treasure map. That was kid stuff in stories by Robert Louis Stevenson. But nobody hid a note in a stone post unless they were up to something bad, something they didn't want anybody to know about. Tonight. Something secret was gong to happen tonight. . . .

Gretchen pulled the sheet up to her chin even though the night oozed heat like the stoves at the cafe. She was dressed, a T-shirt and shorts, and her sneakers were on the floor. She waited until eleven, watching the slow crawl of the hands on her alarm clock

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

and listening to the summer dance of the June bugs against her window screen. She unhooked the screen, sat on the sill, and dropped to the ground. She wished she could ride her bike, but somebody might be out on the road and see her and they'd sure tell Grandmother. Instead, she figured out the shortest route, cutting across the McClelland farm, careful to avoid the pasture where Old Amos glared out at the world with reddish eyes, and slipping in the shadows down Purdy Road.

The full moon hung low in the sky, its milky radiance creating a black and cream world, making it easy to see. She stayed in the shadows. The buzz of the cicadas was so loud she kept a close eye out for headlights coming over the hill or around the curve.

Once near the abandoned mine, she moved from shadow to shadow, smelling the sharp scent of the evergreens, feeling the slippery dried needles underfoot. A tremulous, wavering, plaintive shriek hurt her ears. Slowly, it subsided into a moan. Gretchen's heart raced. A sudden flap, and an owl launched into the air.

Gretchen looked uneasily around the clearing. The boarded-over mine shaft was a dark mound straight ahead. There was a cave-in years ago, and they weren't able to get to the miners in time. In the dark, the curved mound looked like a huge gravestone.

The road, rutted and overgrown, curved past the mine entrance and ended in front of a ramshackle storage building, perhaps half as large as a barn. A huge padlock hung from a rusty chain wound around the big splintery board that barred the double doors.

Nothing moved, though the night was alive with sound, frogs croaking, cicadas rasping.

Gretchen found a big sycamore on the hillside. She climbed high enough to see over the cleared area. She sat on a fat limb, her back to the trunk, her knees to her chin.

The cicada chorus was so loud she didn't hear the car. It appeared without warning, headlights off, lurching in the deep ruts, crushing an overgrowth of weeds as it stopped off the road to one side of the storage shed. The car door slammed. In the moonlight, the deputy's face was a pale mask. As she watched, that pale mask turned ever so slowly, all the way around the clearing.

Gretchen hunkered into a tight crouch. She felt prickles of cold, though it was so hot sweat beaded her face, slip down her arms and legs.

A cigarette lighter flared. The end of the deputy's cigar was a red spot. He leaned inside the car, dragging out something. Metal clanked as he placed the things on the front car fender. Suddenly he turned toward the rutted lane.

Gretchen heard the dull rumble, too, loud enough to drown out the cicadas.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Dust swirled in a thick cloud as the wheels of the army truck churned the soft ruts.

The sheriff was already moving. He propped a big flashlight on the car fender. By the time the driver turned and backed the truck with its rear end facing the shed, the sheriff was snipping the chain.

The driver of the truck wore a uniform. He jumped down and ran to help and the two men lifted up the big splintery board, tossed it aside. Each man grabbed a door. They grunted and strained and pulled and finally both doors were wide open. The soldier hurried to the back of the truck, let down the metal back.

Gretchen strained to catch glimpses of the soldier as he moved back and forth past the flashlight. Tall and skinny, he had a bright bald spot on the top of his head, short dark hair on the sides. His face was bony, with a beaked nose and a chin that sank into his neck. He had sergeant stripes on his sleeves. He was a lot smaller and skinnier than the deputy, but he was twice as fast. They both moved back and forth between the truck and the shed, carrying olive-green gasoline tins in each hand.

Once the sergeant barked, "Get a move on. I've got to get that truck back damn quick."

Even in the moonlight, the deputy's face looked dangerously red and he huffed for breath. He stopped occasionally to mop his face with an oversize handkerchief. The sergeant never paused, and he shot a sour look at the bigger man.

Gretchen tried to count the tins. She got confused, but was sure there were at least forty, maybe a few more.

When the last tin was inside the shed, the doors shoved shut, the chains wrapped around the board, the deputy rested against his car, his breathing as labored as a bulldogger struggling with a calf.

The sergeant planted himself square in front of the gasping deputy and held out his hand.

"Goddamn, man—" the deputy's wind whistled in his throat—"you gotta wait till I sell the stuff. I worked out a deal with a guy in Tulsa. Top price. A lot more than we could get around here. Besides, black-market gas out here might get traced right back to us."

"I want my money." The sergeant's reedy voice sounded edgy and mean.

"Look, fella." The deputy pushed away from the car, glowered down at the smaller man. "You'll get your goddamn money when I get mine."

The soldier didn't move an inch. "Okay. That's good. When do you get yours?"

The deputy didn't answer.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"When's the man coming? We'll meet him together." A hard laugh. "We can split the money right then and there."

The deputy wiped his face and neck with his handkerchief. "Sure. You can help us load. Thursday night. Same time."

"I'll be here." The sergeant moved fast to the truck, climbed into the front seat. After he revved the motor, he leaned out of the window. "I'll be here. And you damn sure better be."

Grandmother settled the big blue bowl in her lap, began to snap green beans.

Gretchen was so tired her eyes burned and her feet felt like lead. She swiped the paring knife around the potato. "Grandmother, what does it mean when people talk about selling gas on the black market?"

Grandmother's hand moved so fast, snap, snap, snap. "We don't have much of that around here. Everyone tries hard to do right. The gas has to be used by people like the farmers and Dr. Sherman so he can go to sick people, and the army. The black market is very wrong, Gretchen. Why, what if there wasn't enough gas for the Jeeps and tanks where Jimmy is?"

There wasn't much sound then but the snap of beans and the soft squish as the potato peelings fell into the sink.

Gretchen tossed the last potato into the big pan of cold water. She scooped up the potato peels. "Grandmother, who catches these people in the black market?"

Grandmother carried her bowl to the sink. "I don't know," she said uncertainly. "I guess in the cities the police. And here it would be the deputy. Or maybe the army."

Gretchen put the dirty dishes on the tray, swiped the cloth across the table.

Deputy Carter grunted, "Bring me some more coffee," but he didn't look up from his copy of the newspaper. He frowned as he printed words in the crossword puzzle.

Across the room, the officer who looked like Alan Ladd was by himself. He smiled at Gretchen. "Tell your grandmother this is the best food I've had since I was home."

Gretchen smiled shyly at him, then she blurted, "Are you still looking for the Spooklight?"

His eyebrows scooted up like snapped window shades. "How'd you know that?"

She polished the table, slid him an uncertain look. "I heard you yesterday," she said softly.

"Oh, sure. Well," he leaned forward conspiratorially, "my colonel thinks it's a great training tool to have the troops search for mys-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

tery lights. The first platoon to find them's going to get a free weekend pass."

Gretchen wasn't sure what a training tool was, or a free pass, but she focused on what mattered to her. "You mean the soldiers are still looking for the lights? They'll come where the lights are?"

"Fast as they can. Of course," he shrugged, "nobody knows when or where they're going to appear, so it's mostly a lot of hiking around in the dark and nothing happens."

Gretchen looked toward the deputy. He was frowning as he scratched out a word, wrote another one. She turned until her back was toward him. "They say that in July the lights dance around the old Sister Sue mine. That's what I heard the other day." Behind her, she heard the creak as the deputy slid out of the booth, clumped toward the cash register. "Excuse me," she said quickly and she turned away.

The sheriff paid forty-five cents total, thirty for the Meatless Tuesday vegetable plate, ten for raisin pie, a nickel for coffee.

When the front door closed behind him, Gretchen hurried to the table. As she cleared it, she carefully tucked the discarded newspaper under her arm.

"A cherry fausfade, please." She slid onto the hard metal stool. The soda fountain at Thompson's Drugs didn't offer comfortable stools like those at the Victory Cafe.

"Cherry phosphate," Millard Thompson corrected. He gave her the sweet smile that made his round face look like a cheerful pumpkin topped by tight coils of red hair. Millard was two years older than she and had lived across the road from her all her life. He played the tuba in the junior high band, had collected more tin cans than anybody in town, and knew which shrubs the butterflies liked. Once he led her on a long walk, scrambling through the rugged bois d'arc to a little valley covered with thousands of monarchs. And in the Thompson washroom, he had two shelves full of chemicals and sometimes he let her watch his experiments. He even had a Bunsen burner. And Millard's big brother Mike was in the 45th, now part of General Patton's Seventh Army. They hadn't heard from him since the landings in Sicily and there was a haunted look in Mrs. Thompson's eyes. Mr. Thompson had a big map at the back of the store and he moved red pins along the invasion route. Mike's unit was reported fighting for the Comiso airport.

Gretchen looked around the store, but it was quiet in midafternoon. Millard's mother was arranging perfumes and powders on a shelf behind the cash register. His dad was in the back of the store behind the pharmacy counter. "Millard," she kept her voice low, "do you know about the black market?"

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

He leaned his elbow on the counter. "See if I got enough cherry in. Yeah, sure, Gretchen. Dad says it's as bad as being a spy. He says people who sell on the black market make blood money. He says they don't deserve to have guys like Mike ready to die for them."

Gretchen loved cherry fausfades (okay, she knew it was phosphate but it had always sounded like fausfade to her) but she just held tight to the tall beaded sundae glass. "Okay, then listen, Millard . . ."

Gretchen struggled to stay awake. She waited a half-hour after Grandmother turned off her light, then slipped from her window. Millard was waiting by Big Angus's pasture.

As they hurried along Purdy Road, Millard asked, "You sure it was Deputy Carter? And he said it was for the black market?"

"Yes."

Millard didn't answer but she knew he was struggling with the truth that they couldn't go to the man who was supposed to catch bad guys. When they pulled the shed doors wide and he shone his flashlight over the dozens and dozens of five-gallon gasoline tins, he gave a low whistle. Being Millard, he picked up a tin, unscrewed the cap, smelled.

"Gas, all right." There was a definite change in Millard's voice when he spoke. He sounded more grownup and very serious. "We got to do something, Gretchen."

She knew that. That's why she'd come to him. "I know." She, too, sounded somber. "Listen, Millard, I got an idea. . . ."

He listened intently while she spoke, then he looked around the clearing, his round face intent, measuring. Then he grinned. "Sure. Sure we can. Dad's got a bunch of powdered magnesium out in the storeroom. They used to use it with the old-fashioned photography." He looked at her blank face. "For the flash, Gretchen. Here's what we'll do. . . ."

Gretchen could scarcely bear the relief that flooded through her when the young lieutenant stopped in for coffee and pie Wednesday afternoon. When she refilled his cup, she said quickly, "Will you look for the Spooklight tonight?"

The lieutenant sighed. "Every night. Don't know why the darned thing's disappeared just when we started looking for it."

"A friend of mine saw it last night. Near the Sister Sue mine." She gripped her cleaning cloth tightly. "If you'll look there tonight, I'm sure you'll find it."

It was cloudy Wednesday night. Gretchen and Millard moved quickly around the clearing, Gretchen clambering up in the trees,

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Millard handing her the pie tins she'd brought from the cafe. She scrambled to high branches, fastened the tins with duct tape.

She was panting by the time she finished. She tried to catch her breath as Millard unwrapped the chain to the big shed. The big chain clanked as he tossed it aside. Gretchen helped him tug the doors wide open. She stepped inside and carefully tucked the newspaper discarded by the sheriff between two tins.

Millard was a dark shadow behind her. "Do you think they'll come?"

"Yes. Oh, Millard, I believe they will. I do." There had been a sudden sharpness in the young officer's eyes. She'd had the feeling he really listened to her. Maybe she felt that way because she wanted it so badly, but there was a calmness in her heart. He would come. He would come.

Millard took his place high in the branches of an oak that grew close to the boarded-over mine shaft. Gretchen clutched the huge oversize flashlight and checked over in her mind which trees had the pie tins and how she could move in the shadows to reach them.

Suddenly Millard began to scramble down from the tree. "Gretchen, Gretchen, where are you?"

"Over here, Millard." She moved out into the clearing. "What's wrong?"

He was panting. "It's the army, but they're going down the wrong road. They're on the road to Hell Hollow. They won't come close enough to see us."

Gretchen could hear the noise now from the road on the other side of the hill.

"I'll go through the woods. I've got my stuff." And Millard disappeared in the night.

Gretchen almost followed. But if Millard decoyed them this way, she had to be ready to do her part.

Suddenly a light burst in the sky and it would be easily seen from Hell Hollow road. Nobody who knew beans would have thought it was the Spooklight but, by golly, it was an odd, unexplained flash in the night sky. Then came another flash and another.

Shouts erupted. "Look, look, there it is!"

"Quick. This way!"

"Over the hill!"

If Millard had been there, she would have hugged him. He'd taken lumps of the powdered magnesium, wrapped them in net (Gretchen found an old dress of her mom's and cut off the net petticoat), and added string wicks that he'd dipped, he told her earnestly, in a strong solution of potassium nitrate. Now he was lighting the wicks and using his slingshot to toss the soon-to-explode packets high in the air.

Gretchen heard Millard crashing back through the woods. He

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

just had time to climb the oak when the soldiers swarmed into the clearing. Gretchen slithered from shadow to shadow, briefly shining the flash high on the tins. The reflected light quivered oddly high in the branches. She made her circuit, then slipped beneath a thick pine and lay on her stomach to watch.

Two more flares shone in the sky and then three in succession blazed right in front of the open shed doors.

The local *Gazette* used headlines as big as the Invasion of Sicily in its Friday edition:

ARMY UNIT FINDS BLACK MARKET GAS AT SISTER SUE MINE

Army authorities revealed Thursday afternoon that unexplained light flashing in the sky Wednesday night led a patrol to a cache of stolen gasoline . . .

It was the talk of the town. Five days later, when Deputy Sheriff Euel Carter was arrested, the local breakfast crowd was fascinated to hear from Mr. Hudson, who heard it from someone who heard it on the post, "You know how Euel always did them damfool crossword puzzles. Well," Mr. Hudson leaned across the table, "seems he left a newspaper right there in the storage shed and the puzzle was all filled out in his handwriting. Joe Bob Terrell from the *Gazette* recognized his handwriting, said he'd seen it a million times in arrest records. The newspaper had Euel's fingerprints all over it and they found his prints on the gas tins. They traced the tins to Camp Crowder and they checked the prints of everybody in the motor pool and found some from this sergeant, and his were on half the tins and on the boards that sealed up that shack by the Sister Sue. They got 'em dead to rights."

Gretchen poured more coffee and smiled. At lunch the nice officer—she'd known he would come that night—had left her a big tip. He'd looked at her, almost asked a question, then shook his head. She could go to Thompson's for a cherry fausfade in a little while and tell Millard everything she'd heard. It was too bad they couldn't tell everyone how clever Millard had been with the magnesium. But that was okay. What really mattered was the gas. Now maybe there'd be enough for Jimmy and Mike. ●

Erratum: Due to a printer's error, the endings of two stories in the January 1999 issue were switched. The last page of Phil Lovesey's story "Under the Knife" is to be found at the end of Dan Stumpf's story "White Like the Snow," and the last page of Dan Stumpf's story "White Like the Snow" is to be found at the end of Phil Lovesey's story "Under the Knife." Our heartfelt apologies to both authors, and to our subscribers and other readers.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

The Theft of the Birthday Candles

by Edward D. Hoch

Edward D. Hoch's latest Nick Velvet tale is an ambitious drawing together of two nearly autonomous plots, involving, on one level, a seemingly inconsequential domestic theft and, on another, an attempt by Velvet's sometime colleague, Sandra Paris, to hijack a shipment of arms. Mr. Hoch pulls it together with characteristic panache, adding another fine tale to the Velvet series. †

Sandra Paris, known in some circles as the White Queen, moved silently across the marble lobby of the Pan Pacific Hotel in Vancouver like a patient lynx stalking her prey. She was a woman in her late thirties with a face of innocent beauty framed by striking platinum-blond hair. Some might have guessed her to be in show business, and, indeed, she'd had a brief career as an actress before turning to more profitable ventures.

As soon as she spotted Raymond Della Ventura leaving the elevator she pounced, intercepting him on the way to the dining room. "Hello there," she greeted him in her coyest voice. "I'm Sandra Paris. You probably don't remember me."

Though she was a tall woman, Della Ventura still towered above her by several inches. He grinned and seemed about to pat her on the head, then said, "On the contrary. I believe we met at Monte Carlo last spring. If you're free, would you join me for breakfast?"

She dazzled him with a smile. "My favorite meal!"

"Yes, it would be."

As with Lewis Carroll's White Queen, Sandra prided herself on accomplishing impossible things before breakfast. Nothing pleased her more than settling down to a morning feast following some particularly brazen endeavor. "They have a fine buffet here,"

©1999 by Edward D. Hoch

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Della Ventura pointed out, "or you can order from the menu."

"What brings you to Vancouver?" she asked after they'd grazed at the buffet and settled down with their food. "I seem to remember you were an arms dealer when we met at Monte Carlo."

"I still am," he said with a smile. "But it is a terrible trade to be in these days. The larger nations all talk peace, so I'm left in bidding wars for small contracts that aren't worth the effort."

Sandra tasted a strip of bacon. "There have been times when I've been able to help out in such matters."

"How? By seducing my rivals?"

"I was thinking more of stealing their plane."

Raymond Della Ventura's face froze for just an instant and then relaxed into uncertain laughter. "Surely you jest!"

She shrugged and buttered a piece of toast. "Whether or not I jest depends entirely upon you."

He glanced around at the other tables and lowered his voice. "We can't talk about this here."

"After breakfast, perhaps we could go for a stroll along the harbor."

At about the same time, a thousand miles south, in Reno, Nick Velvet was having breakfast with a potential client named Beth Blanchard. He was explaining to her the exact nature of his business. "My usual fee is thirty thousand dollars plus any unusual expenses. I steal only objects of little or no value."

"I understand that, Mr. Velvet." Beth Blanchard was old California money, which usually meant oil or water. Nick's first glance at her stylish hairdo, carefully sculpted face, and a large diamond ring had almost made him double his fee. She was probably in her forties, trying to look younger and pretty much succeeding. "I am prepared to pay half your fee in advance."

"Just what is it you want stolen?"

She took a sip of wine. "The candles off a birthday cake."

"I once stole an entire birthday cake, but—just the candles?"

"Just the candles."

"Nothing special about them? No diamond rings attached or anything like that?"

His question made her cover her own ring with her right hand. "So far as I know they're ordinary candles, a few inches long, sold in boxes of a dozen for a dollar or less. Nothing is attached."

"And where are they now?"

"More important is where they'll be tomorrow evening. I'm giving a birthday party for my stepdaughter, Tess, at the Friars' Inn. She's turning twenty-five and I've invited nearly a hundred of her friends. There'll be an orchestra and dancing after dinner, and that's when the cake will be served."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"She's your husband's daughter by a previous marriage?"

Beth Blanchard nodded. "Ralph died five years ago, swept overboard during a yacht race on Lake Tahoe, and I made a vow to look after Tess as if she were my very own. I think I've done that."

"It must have been terrible for her, losing her father like that."

"Worse for me. He left a pile of debts. Tess is all right because her grandfather set up a trust for her many years back, but I had to do battle with the IRS."

"Where's her real mother?"

"Back in New York. She's been out to see Tess once or twice, though not recently. Tess asked me to invite her tomorrow night."

"Why do you want me to steal the candles from the birthday cake?"

"I understood that you asked no questions involving motives."

"I don't. Sometimes I just get curious."

She passed him an envelope across the table. "Here's half your fee. That should satisfy your curiosity."

"It does." He produced a small notebook. "This party will be held tomorrow at Friars' Inn. Where's that located?"

"Right by the airport. You can do the job and catch the red-eye back to New York."

"Sounds good to me," Nick agreed. "About what time will the cake be brought in?"

"After dinner, around eight-thirty. Tess's birth mother has requested that she do the honors. She'll wheel the cake out of the kitchen into the party room at the inn."

"And that's when the candles will have to be stolen. It doesn't leave me much time to prepare."

"One other thing—no one should know about the theft."

Nick stopped writing. "How do I steal them without anyone knowing they're gone?"

"That's what I'm paying you for."

It was a cool, misty morning in Vancouver, typical for April, as Sandra Paris and Raymond Della Ventura strolled slowly along the harbor walk toward the ferry dock. "I know you're running guns to various groups in Latin America and the Far East," Sandra told him. "And I also know that your business is threatened by a man named Murkum, who appeared out of nowhere a few years back and is trying to monopolize the small-arms trade in those areas."

"You know a great deal."

Sandra watched an elderly man lingering nearby. When she was certain he was harmless she continued. "Murkum is well named. His past is murky indeed, and even his nationality is not known with any degree of certainty. What is known is that he

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

arranged to purchase a used Russian cargo plane, an Antonov 26, in Latvia this week for thirty thousand dollars."

Della Ventura smiled slightly. "Your information is accurate but outdated. The sale has been completed and Murkum took delivery of the plane yesterday morning."

Sandra glanced at her watch, calculating the time difference in her head. "Do you want the plane?"

The tall man snickered. "I want it with its cargo. It's no good to me empty."

"The cargo is small arms?"

He nodded. "Seventy-seven cases of Bulgarian-made weapons, including three hundred Kalashnikov assault rifles with twenty thousand rounds of ammunition, fifteen nine-millimeter pistols with four thousand rounds of ammunition, two sniper rifles with night-vision sights, ten rocket launchers with two hundred rocket grenades, and one hundred hand grenades."

"You know those figures by heart!" she said with some amazement.

"A copy of the real bill of lading, not the fake one showing machine parts, was faxed to my hotel by an associate in Sofia this morning. That's enough to start a small war, or to keep one going. The cargo was picked up yesterday afternoon and is now on its way across the Pacific by the great circle route. The plane will refuel here overnight and take off before breakfast on the flight south. I believe the cases of arms will be parachuted to members of the guerrilla movement in southern Mexico, though one can never be too certain with Murkum."

"The fact that you're here tells me you plan some action during that refueling stop."

The tall man shrugged. "My associate tells me Murkum himself is on board the plane. I am planning to suggest a partnership to him."

The idea of it made Sandra laugh. "A partnership! This man has purchased the plane and the shipment of arms, as well as hiring a pilot and crew. Why should he want a partner at this stage of things?"

"Because he is very short of working capital. The arms cost him sixty-five thousand dollars in American money. I understand he has been paid a hundred and sixty-five for it. Out of that hundred thousand dollars profit must come the cost of the plane, the cost of parachute rigging from South Africa, and payments to the pilot and crew. That doesn't leave much profit, considering the risk of the enterprise."

Sandra did some silent calculations. "How much would the plane and its cargo be worth to you?"

"The plane plus cargo cost Murkum ninety-five thousand. For-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

get the parachute riggings. You can have them if you want. I'd give fifty thousand for the plane and cargo."

They walked along a little farther, reaching the ferry dock just as a boat sounded its horn and slipped away toward North Vancouver. Sandra watched its crossing through the morning mist for a few moments and then said, "One hundred thousand."

"Are you crazy? I could buy the whole thing for ninety-five!"

"Maybe you could, maybe you couldn't. Obviously you want the shipment for another buyer, one who'll pay more than the hundred and sixty-five thousand dollars Murkum received from the Mexican guerrillas."

He scowled down at her. "Why is that so obvious?"

"Because, for one thing, you don't want or need the parachute rigging. You're not planning a parachute drop for those weapons. You're going to land the plane somewhere, and certainly not in the Mexican jungle. And since Murkum already collected his money, what would you gain at this point by hijacking the plane and delivering the guns to the original buyers? No, the guns are going somewhere else, where there are bigger bucks and some sort of airport or landing strip. That's the deal you'd offer Murkum for a partnership and that's the deal I'm cutting in on. Pay me one hundred grand and the plane, with its cargo, is yours before breakfast tomorrow."

Raymond Della Ventura held out his hand. "Lady, you drive a hard bargain. A word of warning. Murkum is probably armed. You may want a gun. I have one."

"I won't need it," Sandra answered. "Guns just get you in trouble."

When Nick Velvet learned that Tess's birth mother would be presenting her daughter with the cake, he asked Beth Blanchard to arrange a meeting with her. "I'll do better than that," Tess's stepmother told him. "Her name is Irma Fine and her plane arrives from New York at four this afternoon. You can come with me to meet her. We'll leave a little early and I'll show you the Friars' Inn."

After phoning Gloria at home to assure her all was going well, Nick picked up Mrs. Blanchard at two o'clock and drove her in his rental car out to the Friars' Inn. Designed like a mission church complete with bell tower, it was an upscale restaurant with a party room in back that could accommodate two hundred people. "We'll only be using half of it," Beth Blanchard explained after she'd told the banquet manager they wanted to have another look at the room. "Cocktails will be served at six-thirty, followed by dinner an hour later. The cake will be a large sheet with 'Happy Birthday Tess' written on it in pink icing. Irma asked if she could

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

do the candles and wheel the cake in, and I had to agree. It will be nice for Tess. She hasn't seen her mom for several years."

Nick glanced into the kitchen, noting the location of a back door to the parking lot. A small serving table on wheels sat next to the swinging doors to the party room itself, and he assumed that would be used to transport the cake once the candles were lit. Back in the car he had a question for his client. "Is it those specific candles you want stolen? The only way to keep the theft a secret is to substitute other candles for them. That way there'll still be candles on the cake."

She considered the suggestion. "Would you have time to remove the candles and put in new ones?"

"I have a method. I'll have the candles positioned in a frame. I'll push them into the frosting, release the frame, and lift it off. They won't be in exactly the same holes as the original candles, but with thick, soft birthday cake frosting no one is likely to notice. On sheet cakes the candles can be almost anywhere."

"How will you remove the original candles? How will you have time to light the new ones?"

"Let me worry about that. We'd better get on to the airport. These transcontinental flights are often a few minutes early."

They arrived at the Reno/Tahoe International Airport just as the flight from New York reached the gate. Irma Fine was the third passenger off the plane, which told Nick she'd almost certainly flown first class. She was a handsome woman in her fifties, not quite as flashy as Beth Blanchard but with a quick intelligent gaze that took in Nick and Beth in an instant and formed some conclusion about their relationship.

Beth must have seen it too, because she introduced them with a throwaway phrase. "Irma, this is Nick Velvet. He does some work for me."

"Hello, Nick," Irma Fine said, shaking hands with an extra squeeze reserved for those who were more than hired help. "Nice to meet you."

"Likewise." She was carrying a shopping bag with a gift-wrapped package inside, obviously a birthday present for her daughter. Nick took it from her and led the way to the baggage-claim area. Beth and Irma walked behind him, their conversation friendly but a bit forced.

"How's my daughter?" Irma Fine asked.

"Fine. She likes her job and she's dating a nice young man. We may be hearing marriage plans soon."

"That's good news. I hope I'll get to meet him."

"He should be at the house with Tess now."

The Blanchard house was an expensive one with a panoramic view, and as Nick drove up a servant hurried out to assist with

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

the luggage. Once inside, Nick was introduced to the birthday girl herself. Tess Blanchard was a slim blue-eyed beauty with a statuesque grace that reminded him just a bit of Sandra Paris, the White Queen, a rival and occasional partner in their shady world of larceny for hire.

At her side was a young man named Frank Duvout. Both were wearing white tennis outfits and it was obvious they were a couple. Tess gave her mother a hug and a kiss on the cheek, as if they'd seen each other only a few days earlier, then quickly introduced Duvout. "I'm so glad you're getting to meet Frank, Mom. I was beginning to think we'd have to fly to New York to get you two together."

"I've heard a great many wonderful things about you, Mrs. Fine," the young man said.

"It's been like having two mothers," Tess agreed. "I'm a lucky woman, even though I see far too little of Mom here." She gave Irma a little hug.

"Is there anything I can do to help with tomorrow's party?" Nick asked helpfully.

"I believe the restaurant is handling everything," Tess said.

"Except the cake," her mother interjected. "I'm handling that."

"Well," Nick told them, "I'll be there if you need anything."

He decided to retreat then, allowing Irma to become acquainted with Frank Duvout. Beth walked him to the door. "That went well. At tomorrow's party you can intrude a bit on her cake preparations."

"I intend to," Nick said.

She opened the front door for him and froze. A gray-haired man with a briefcase stood there, about to ring the bell. "Mr. Perkins! I wasn't expecting you!"

He cleared his throat, peering at her through tinted half-glasses. "I was in the neighborhood, Mrs. Blanchard, and took a chance that you might be home."

Beth Blanchard, obviously flustered, managed the introductions. "Nick Velvet, this is my attorney, Rich Perkins."

The attorney squinted, shook hands, and returned his attention to Nick's client. "I wanted to go over tomorrow's formalities with you, Mrs. Blanchard. If this is a bad time, perhaps we could—"

"Yes," she readily agreed. "This is a very bad time. My stepdaughter is inside with her mother."

"I'm sorry. My secretary will phone you in the morning."

He quickly retreated down the front steps to his car. Beth muttered something under her breath that sounded like "Pompous ass."

Driving back to his hotel, Nick wondered what business had brought the attorney to the Blanchard home, and why Beth had

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

been so reluctant to see him in the presence of Irma Fine. It gave Nick something else to think about as he mulled over the best method of stealing candles from a birthday cake.

Early the following morning, with the April mist still hanging heavy in the air, the man known as Murkum strode quickly across the tarmac at Vancouver International Airport. He had the look of a vigorous outdoorsman, perhaps in his fifties, though his weathered face made age uncertain. He slowed his pace as he neared the Russian cargo plane that had carried him across the Pacific, recognizing the tall man waiting there for him.

"Ah, Della Ventura, isn't it?"

"That's right, Mr. Murkum."

"This is a surprising place to encounter you."

"I came here to talk about our business partnership."

Murkum snorted. "We have no partnership. I barely know you."

"I'm aware of the contents of that cargo plane. In fact, I have a bill of lading in my pocket."

"That would be of interest only at my final destination. Planes are not searched during routine refueling stops."

Della Ventura shook his head. "You don't understand. I'm not threatening you with the authorities. I understand you're in bad financial straits at the moment and perhaps I can help."

"My finances will be improving very shortly. Excuse me, here's my pilot now. What is it, Androv?"

A man who might have been Russian, wearing a pilot's gold-braided cap along with a flight jacket, came up to them. "My co-pilot's been taken ill. I think he had some bad food. We'll have to hire another lad." He motioned toward a fellow with shaggy black hair and the shadow of a beard on his jaw. "This is Kyle Hendrix."

Murkum stared at the copilot. "How much flying time do you have?"

"Eight hundred hours."

"Ever flown an Antonov 26 before?"

"No," the young man admitted, "but I've been copilot on cargo planes a lot like it."

Murkum turned back to his pilot. "I'd rather have your other guy."

"That means waiting at least a day till he's well enough. He can't fly like he is."

"We can't wait." Murkum looked the new man up and down. "All right, Hendrix, you're hired."

"I'm going, too," Della Ventura said.

"Like hell you are!"

Della Ventura waited until the pilots were out of earshot and then said, "If you won't agree to a partnership, I'll buy the plane

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

and cargo from you on the spot for one hundred thousand American dollars. That's more than you paid, and you'll have the money from the Mexicans besides."

Murkum squinted at him, facing the rising sun to the east. "You must have another buyer in mind."

"That's right."

"The Mexicans wouldn't like being double-crossed. They'd come after me."

"It's a big world."

Murkum considered it for a moment. "Who's your buyer?"

"I can't tell you that, not yet."

"But he's paying how much—two hundred grand?"

"More. About three times what the Mexicans paid you."

"Get on the plane," Murkum said with a sigh. "We'll talk on the way. My time is getting short."

There was another man already on board, one whom Raymond Della Ventura had not yet met. He was introduced simply as Quinen. He was along to handle the cargo, Murkum said, and his broad shoulders certainly seemed capable of that. The seventy-seven cases of arms and ammunition were held in place by cargo webbing, their parachute harnesses not yet attached. That was fine with Della Ventura. It would save him the trouble of removing them again.

"Are we ready for takeoff?" Murkum asked the pilot.

"Five minutes. I'm having some breakfast brought on board for Hendrix and myself. Want anything?"

Murkum glanced at Della Ventura, who shook his head. "No, we ate already."

"We'd better get this deal worked out," Della Ventura said. "I have a cashier's check in my pocket, drawn on a Swiss account."

"Wait till we're in the air."

Della Ventura was growing nervous. Even after the boxed breakfasts from the airport's food vendor arrived, he paced the plane's interior until the pilot told him to take one of the crew seats along the side and fasten his belt. Then the engines turned over and came to life. The big plane coasted onto the runway and within minutes they were airborne.

Della Ventura had expected Sandra to make her move then, but nothing happened. The cockpit door was closed and he couldn't see what might be going on. He moistened his lips and stared at Murkum and the broad-shouldered Quinen. "How long is the flight to Mexico?" he asked.

Murkum managed a pasty smile. "There's been a change of plan. We're flying to Utah instead, and then to Nevada."

That was when Della Ventura noticed the gun coming up in

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Quinen's hand. He was fast reaching his own weapon, and in the instant they both fired it was dead even.

The guests gathered early that evening at the Friars' Inn for Tess Blanchard's birthday party. Nick Velvet was somewhat surprised to find himself seated next to the stuffy Blanchard lawyer, Rich Perkins. His tinted glasses reflected the overhead lights as he turned toward Nick and said, "I know we met yesterday at the Blanchard home, but I missed your connection with the family. Are you Tess's uncle?"

"An unofficial uncle. I couldn't miss her twenty-fifth birthday party."

"It's a big day for the young lady," the attorney agreed. "I've only known the family a few years, but Mrs. Blanchard and her stepdaughter have been very close, especially since the tragic accident to her father on Lake Tahoe."

Waiters had begun serving the food, and Nick let his gaze move around the room, observing Tess and young Frank Duvout snuggling at the head table. Beth Blanchard and Tess's mother, Irma Fine, were both seated there, too, along with a few other relatives Nick didn't know. After the salad had been served he took the opportunity to continue the conversation. "The boating accident was five years ago, wasn't it?"

"That's right. Of course I didn't know the family then, but I remember the newspaper accounts. They searched the lake for weeks. They even found a body, but DNA tests proved it wasn't Ralph Blanchard."

"I understand Tess has a trust fund from her grandfather."

Perkins nodded as he ate his salad. "I never knew him, but he was quite well off. The trust fund is a lucky break for her. If the money had gone to her father it would still be tied up."

As the dinner guests were finishing the main course, Nick spotted Irma Fine heading for the kitchen. It was nearing cake time. He quickly followed and found her opening two small boxes of candles. They seemed ordinary enough, hardly anything that might prove lethal to the guest of honor. As he'd guessed, they were pink for a girl. Irma arranged them in uneven rows across the top of the sheet cake. Nick offered to help but she waved him away. "This is a mother's job."

She threw away the two empty boxes of candles and lit a match, passing the flame from one wick to the next. One of the chefs casually watched the operation before turning back to his stove. Then, when all seemed ready for the presentation, a snag suddenly developed. "Where's the little cart?" Irma demanded. The chef came over to look around and confirmed that it was missing

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

from its usual place. They went in search of it together, exactly as Nick had planned.

Quickly he wet his fingers in the sink and pulled the candles from the cake, dousing the flames as he did so. He knew it would only be moments before they located the cart where he'd hidden it earlier in the storage room. Then, working as fast as he could, he dropped the stolen candles into his pocket and produced the frame he'd left in the kitchen on a high shelf. It held twenty-five new pink candles which he turned upside down, pressing the accelerant-treated wicks against a hot stove until they all caught fire at once. Then he pushed the candles into the top of the cake, releasing and removing the frame.

Nick's candles covered a smaller area of the cake than Irma's had, but by the time she returned a moment later with the cart she was too hurried to notice. He lifted the cake onto the cart for her, positioning it in the center, and she gave him a quick thank-you smile. Then he held open the kitchen door while she wheeled the cake into the party room to a chorus of "Happy Birthday."

Tess Blanchard beamed with pleasure. It was her big moment.

The Antonov 26 cargo plane had touched down at the Reno/Tahoe International Airport just before noon that morning. The pilot reported an emergency on board and requested permission to land. The story he told was that two members of the five-man crew had gotten into an argument and shot each other. Both were dead. The men were identified as Raymond Della Ventura and Abel Quinen. Although jurisdiction was unclear at that point, the Reno police were summoned and Detective Sergeant Ritter arrived shortly to take charge of the investigation.

Ritter was a handsome young man who wore his dark hair cut short. He had a way of squinting when he spoke, which Sandra Paris found attractive. If he'd been ten years older, she might have taken off her wig and makeup and revealed herself to be a woman. As it was, she simply answered his questions as the copilot, Kyle Hendrix. "Where did the flight originate, Mr. Hendrix?" the detective asked.

"Somewhere in Eastern Europe, Latvia or Bulgaria, I think. I didn't hire on as copilot until Vancouver, when their regular man got sick." She was using her best bass voice, one that had fooled plenty of men in the past.

"What was your cargo?"

"Machine parts of some sort."

"The cargo bay is empty now."

"After the shooting the plane began losing altitude. Mr. Murkum was afraid a stray bullet might have damaged the controls. We had to jettison the cargo over a lake."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Tell me about the shooting."

"I didn't see what happened. I was in the cockpit with the pilot. We heard shots and Androv gave me the controls while he checked on them. When he came back he said Della Ventura and Quinen had killed each other."

Ritter flipped back a few pages in his notebook. "Let's see now. Murkum says you were headed for Mexico, right?"

"That's correct."

"From Vancouver?"

"Yes."

His eyes studied her carefully, as if seeking out some deep secret just below the surface. "I see." He made a notation in his book and asked a few more routine questions. Finally he said, "All right, Mr. Hendrix. You may go. But please wait outside until I'm finished with the pilot and Mr. Murkum. I may have some follow-up questions."

Sandra waited impatiently in the Customs lounge at the airport until the questioning ended some hours later. Androv and Murkum both emerged around eight o'clock. They were free to go, but the pilot felt he should check over the plane first before they thought about continuing their journey. Murkum and Sandra both carried American passports, hers in the name of Kyle Hendrix, and they passed through Customs together. He made a quick phone call and then joined her. "Where are you headed now?" she asked, still in her deep voice. With her client dead and the cargo she'd been hired to steal now resting at the bottom of Eagle Lake, she was at loose ends. She only knew she wouldn't be returning to that plane.

"I have to see a man named Nick Velvet," he told her. "I owe him some money."

Sandra froze at the sound of the name. What was Nick doing in Reno? Certainly he wasn't involved in stealing a shipment of small arms. "Maybe I'll go with you," she said casually.

He considered it for a moment and then said, "Fine. I might need some extra muscle."

Beth Blanchard slipped away from the head table when the dancing began and met Nick in the hallway near the back entrance of the restaurant. She led him outside to the parking lot, where they were alone. It was almost dark and across the field he could see the lights of planes landing and taking off. Nick handed over the candles with bits of frosting still adhering to them. "Here they are, as promised."

She accepted them with a smile. "Was it difficult?"

"Should I say it was a piece of cake?"

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"I expect the balance of your money to arrive shortly. There was an unexpected delay at the airport."

"Is my fee so high that you have to fly it in?"

"I have a partner." She glanced toward the door. "And here he is now."

Two men walked in from the airport road at that moment. The taller of the two had the weathered face of an outdoorsman. The other, wearing a worn leather flight jacket, looked like a boy despite a shadow of beard along his jaw. When a passing light caught his face, he seemed familiar to Nick. "Hello, Beth," the older man said.

"What happened at the airport?"

"It's a long story. I'll tell you sometime. Is this Velvet?"

"It is," she answered, "but who's the kid?"

"My copilot, Hendrix." Then he motioned toward Nick. "Did he do the job?"

She showed him the candles. "It went well. No one noticed, not even Irma."

Murkum nodded and took a thick envelope from his pocket. "Here's my share."

Nick's fingers reached for the envelope, seconds away from finishing the job, when the back door of the Friars' Inn opened and a woman stepped out to join them. "What's going on?" she asked. "I came out to have a cigarette." It was Irma Fine.

"This is private, Irma," Beth Blanchard said, trying to step in front of Murkum.

But she wasn't fast enough, and Irma got a good look at Murkum. "My God, Ralph!" she exclaimed in surprise. "You're alive!"

Murkum gave an animal growl of frustration and pulled out his pistol. "You're through messing up my life," he told her.

Then the copilot, Hendrix, grabbed his wrist and flipped him to the ground like a baby. Nick had seen that trick before. Now, even in the fading light, he recognized Sandra Paris.

It was sometime later when Nick and Sandra finally had a chance to talk in a booth at the Friars' bar. She had removed some of the makeup to retrieve her feminine image, and Nick gave a sigh of relief when he saw her emerge from the ladies' room. "Now you're starting to look like yourself again. What were you doing on a Russian cargo plane disguised as a man?"

"Trying to do an impossible thing before breakfast, but today it proved too impossible. One of Murkum's men drew a gun and my client was foolish enough to shoot it out with him while we were in the air. It's a wonder we weren't all killed."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"How did they all manage to carry guns onto a plane? Murkum must have had one, too."

"They don't check transport crews like they do commercial airline passengers. But with my client dead, I was in one heck of a scrape. If I revealed who I was and what I was there for, Murkum might have killed me. As it was, I had to sit there while he and the pilot argued over what to do next. Murkum wanted to fly over a lake and dump the bodies out. The pilot wanted to dump the guns and keep the bodies. He argued that if someone happened to see us dumping the bodies and they were later recovered, we might face murder charges. He said it was safer to land in Reno with the bodies and an empty plane, and tell the truth about the shooting."

"So that's what you did," Nick said. "But where were those guns bound for?"

"Della Ventura thought they were headed for Mexican rebels, but in truth Murkum planned to land the plane on a dry lake bed in Utah and deliver them to a group of right-wing militants. My client had a similar customer in a different state. There seem to be a lot of crazy people around."

"So Murkum always planned to be in Reno tonight, after delivering the arms?"

"I guess so," Sandra agreed. "But you know more about that part than I do."

Nick Velvet sighed. In retrospect it all seemed unreal. "I was hired to steal the candles off a birthday cake, but I wasn't told why. Beth Blanchard said it was her stepdaughter Tess's twenty-fifth birthday. Her father had supposedly drowned in Lake Tahoe five years ago, though apparently his body was never found. He had a great many debts at the time. As we now know, he didn't drown, though he may have arranged for a body to be found in the lake so he'd be declared dead. That didn't happen because the DNA wasn't right. But Ralph Blanchard escaped to Europe and started a new life, parlaying a little money into a hit-and-miss business of buying and selling small arms."

"What happened tonight? Why did you need to steal those candles?"

"Tess's real mother, Irma Fine, was Blanchard's first wife. Somehow she heard about the birthday party for her daughter and insisted on attending. Not only that, she insisted on providing the birthday cake. She wanted to light the candles in the restaurant kitchen and wheel the cake in herself. There was no way Beth could stop her, other than hiring me to steal the candles."

"But why?"

"A lawyer told me Tess was due to inherit a large trust fund from her late grandfather. Since she hadn't received it at age

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

twenty-one, it was a pretty safe guess that she would get it at twenty-five. The lawyer even remarked that it was a big day for her."

"She'd receive the trust fund tonight!"

Nick smiled. "That's what everyone was supposed to think. Except Irma Fine. If anyone knew Tess Blanchard's correct age, it was her mother. I watched her put those candles on the cake. She opened two small boxes, arranged the candles, and threw the empty boxes away. Those boxes almost always hold twelve candles each. But say it was an odd manufacturer who packed thirteen to the box. If that was the case, what happened to the twenty-sixth candle? No, there had to be twelve candles in each box, twenty-four candles in all. What does that tell us, from the hands of Tess's mother herself? That Tess was not twenty-five tonight, despite what her stepmother said, but only twenty-four. I was hired to steal the candles so no one would notice and question the number. Tess's inheritance from her grandfather had become very important to her stepmother, and to her father."

"So they made her a year older, but how?"

"It's not as difficult as you might think. Tess went along with it, of course, even though her father and stepmother would have taken part of the inheritance. They had a new lawyer who hadn't known the grandfather or drawn up his original will. They only had to change one figure on a copy of her birth certificate and one figure on the copies of the grandfather's trust papers. A small bribe to a paralegal at the law office could have handled the whole thing. I imagine the original plan called for Ralph Blanchard faking his own death so that Beth could collect his insurance. But without a body, the insurance payment had to wait for a legal presumption of death, which is seven years in Nevada and California. With things closing in on him, he couldn't wait another two years."

"Couldn't you or the stepmother simply have added a candle to the cake?"

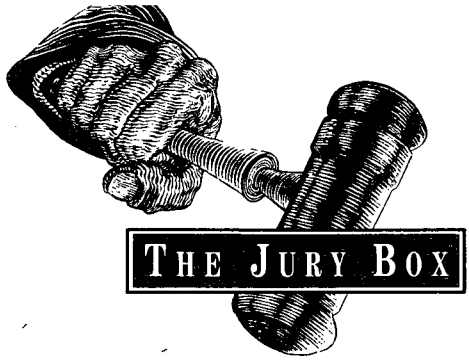
"If it didn't match the others it would have stood out like a firecracker. My replacements didn't match exactly, but at least they were pink and all alike."

"What'll Tess's father do now?"

"Answer a great many questions. Irma was calling the police before we left. They'll want to ask him about that other body in the lake, and about pulling a gun on his ex-wife. Irma will also accuse him of attempted fraud in changing his daughter's birth date. Even if he talks his way out of all that, those militants in Utah are going to want their money back."

Sandra Paris gave a sigh. "At least I hope Tess Blanchard had a happy birthday. Maybe she'll invite you back next year for her real twenty-fifth." ●

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED



by Jon L. Breen

The 1950s, with their Cold War excesses of witch hunts and blacklists and their relatively weak popular music (at least compared to the 30s and 60s), may not have been such a great decade to grow up in. But I look back with nostalgia, even for those early rock and roll songs I hated at the time. How could I not revere the decade that made me a mystery fiction fan? The first issue of *EQMM* I bought was July 1956, objectively speaking probably no more special than any other, but what a range of contributors: Graham Greene, Thomas Flanagan, Agatha Christie, Ruth McKenney, Fredric Brown, Alexandre Dumas, and Jim Thompson!

Several recent books bring back the 50s for me for various reasons. *The Big Book of Noir* (Carroll & Graf, $19.95), edited by Ed Gorman, Lee Server, and Martin H. Greenberg, is an irresistible compilation of articles and interviews that not only explore the history of film noir but delve into its print equivalent, of which many of the best practitioners were 50s paperback original writers like Gil Brewer, Harry Whittington, Peter Rabe, Charles Williams, Donald Hamilton, John D. MacDonald, and Chester Himes. (Truth in reviewing: I am a contributor to this volume, with an article that I hope will convince you the 1981 film version of John Gregory Dunne's 1977 novel *True Confessions* is a neglected classic of the crime film.)

***** Avram Davidson: *The Investigations of Avram Davidson,* edited by Grania Davis and Richard A. Lupoff, St. Martin's, $23.95. A few months after I bought my first *EQMM,* the April 1958 issue presented Avram Davidson's "The Necessity of His Condition" as winner of the magazine's Twelfth Annual Contest. The lead story in this collection of the author's best crime and detective fiction remains impressive today, not because it concerns the recently trendy subject matter of slavery

©1999 by Jon L. Breen

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

but as a model both for historical fiction (with the extensive research seamlessly integrated into the narrative and dialogue) and for the ironic twist story. The rest of the volume, finishing with the only completed story in a projected series about New York's 19th century High Constable Jacob Hay, lives up to that standard. Best known as a writer of science fiction and fantasy, Davidson was one of the masters of the crime short story, bearing comparison with Stanley Ellin. (The dozen-page biographical introduction, an evocative account of the writing life, also appears with essays of similar interest in Richard A. Lupoff's *Writer at Large* [Gryphon Publications, P.O. Box 209, Brooklyn, NY 11228; $15]. Among the other topics: S.S. Van Dine, Philip K. Dick, Edgar Rice Burroughs, Fredric Brown, Robert A. Heinlein, and the author's memorable experiences with jury duty and an income tax audit.)

**** Ed Gorman: *The Day the Music Died,* Carroll & Graf, $22.95. As rock-and-roll fans mourn Buddy Holly, Richie Valens, and the Big Bopper, killed in a recent plane crash, young lawyer-cum-private-eye Sam McCain has problems closer to his Black River Falls, Iowa, home: the murder of a young woman, apparently by her husband, whose aunt, a local judge who has employed Sam as an investigator, wants him to find the real killer. No writer captures the mood of 50s Middle America, through pop-cultural references and telling details of attitudes and relationships, better than Gorman.

*** Henry Slesar: *Murder at Heartbreak Hospital,* Academy Chicago, $21. In the late 50s, Slesar emerged as a prolific short-story writer for the mystery and science fiction digests. Though his first novel, the Edgar-winning *The Gray Flannel Shroud* (1959), was followed by only a handful of others, Slesar has penned mysteries for motion pictures, radio, television, jigsaws, and acrostics in the intervening years. His latest novel, published in Europe in 1990 but (puzzlingly) not in the United States until now, draws as successfully on his career as a soap-opera writer (for *The Edge of Night*) as that first novel did on his background in advertising.

*** William F. Nolan: *Sharks Never Sleep,* St. Martin's, $22.95. The most ubiquitous writer on 50s paperback racks was the prolific Erle Stanley Gardner. The third book in Nolan's extremely enjoyable Black Mask series, set in 30s Hollywood, finds narrator Gardner, accused of the poisoning murder of a former lover, defending himself in court. With Dashiell Hammett playing Paul Drake to Gardner's Perry Mason, the movie-ish trial climax has a tongue-in-cheek feel. The old-school relationship of Raymond Chandler and the judge helps Gardner's cause more than once. (What is a hack? Gardner, the unpretentious pulp writer, states he would never stoop to the movie script doctoring done for a

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

buck by Hammett, a writer with a serious literary reputation.)

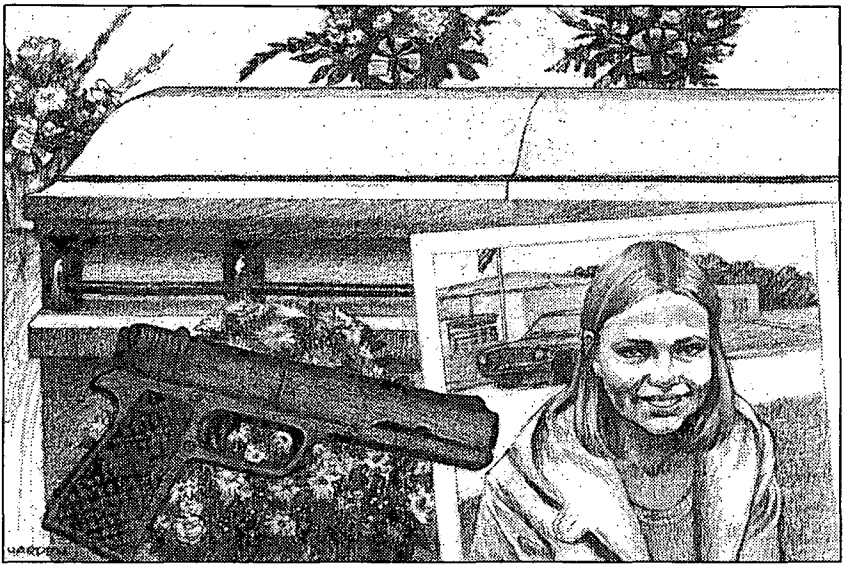
**** Tony Hillerman: *The First Eagle,* HarperCollins, $25. The latest case for Jim Chee of the Navajo Tribal Police and his former boss, now turned private eye, Joe Leaphorn, is a strong one, possibly the best since *A Thief of Time* (1988). Elements include eagle poaching, the murder of a Tribal Police officer, the disappearance of a young biologist, and a deadly new version of the bubonic plague. Hillerman combines mystery puzzle, human relations, and problems of scientific and police ethics in a masterful way.

*** Bill Pronzini: *Carpenter and Quincannon: Professional Detective Services*, Crippen & Landru, P.O. Box 9315, Norfolk, VA 23505; $16 paperbound, $40 limited hardcover. The late 19th century San Francisco sleuth John Quincannon appears in nine solid mysteries, two from *EQMM,* most from the late lamented *Louis L'Amour Western Magazine,* and one original to this volume. Fans of Edward D. Hoch's Ben Snow stories are sure to like these, which combine the Western ambience with fair-play detection, including locked rooms and impossible crimes. Politically correct billing apart, Sabina Carpenter is not always an equal partner in the detective work, though two of the cases she is instrumental in solving, "Lady One-Eye" and "The Desert Limited," are among the best in the book.

** Agatha Christie: *Black Coffee,* adapted as a novel by Charles Osborne, St. Martin's, $22.95. Christie biographer Osborne obviously stayed close to the original in this novelization of a 1930 play about Hercule Poirot: Much of the narrative reads like stage directions and all the brightest bits occur in the dialogue. Captain Hastings, that densest of Watson figures, appears as comic relief but does not narrate the story. The cast of characters and stately-home setting are Golden-Age-British standard. This is fun for fans to be sure, but neither prose nor puzzle are anywhere near the quality of Christie novels from the same period.

When I want to read a book about a mystery writer, given a choice among a biography, a critical study, and a "Companion" (generally comprised of plot summaries, character lists, maps, quizzes, and dictionaries of allusions, with a touch of biography and not a shred of critical commentary), the latter option would almost always be my last choice. Annoyingly, it is also the most likely to find a publisher in the current market. The latest example is Sharon A. Feaster's *The Cat Who... Companion* (Berkley, $13), an undoubtedly meticulous and fan-pleasing guide to the works of Lillian Jackson Braun that spends only 13 pages telling us about Braun and gives not a clue as to which of the novels about reporter Jim Qwilleran and his feline detecting colleagues are most or least worthy of the reader's attention.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED



Art by Laurie Harden

Her Mother's Secrets

by Kristine Kathryn Rusch

Violet had one year of pretty in her life—1976—and at the time she had been too concerned about her weight to notice. She remembered, vividly, obsessing about her fat thighs. She was so obsessed, in fact, that she never wore shorts or miniskirts, even though she weighed 115 pounds, and had, at that point, thighs six inches in diameter.

She discovered her year of pretty twenty-one years later when she was going through old photographs in her mother's house, preparing it for sale. Her mother had died of pneumonia two days before, and left Violet the task of dealing with everything, the estate, the house, and the daily phone calls from her mother's friends, asking for a memorial service. Her mother had expressly asked for a conventional funeral, and Violet had had to explain that wish again and again.

The pictures were a revelation. She sat in the middle of her mother's floor, boxes strewn around the orange shag carpet, her grandmother's rocking chair a hand's reach from her side. The television was off, unusual for that time of day in that house, and

©1999 by Kristine Kathryn Rusch

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

she had changed the radio from her mother's soft-jazz station to the town's only oldies station. The music somehow added to the memories, made them jar against the images in front of her.

She remembered that time so well, feeling gangly and dumpy and flawed. She remembered using Noxema at night and Stridex in the morning, remembered hours in front of the beveled mirror in the bathroom playing with her hair, remembered shunning makeup because she was too terrified she'd put it on wrong.

The photographs said she hadn't needed makeup. The girl that looked back at her was not the one she remembered. This girl was slender, with dark brown hair in a stylish cut, clear gray eyes, and a skin that appeared flawless.

Not like she remembered.

None of it was as she remembered.

None of it at all.

Kristine Kathryn Rusch was the editor of *The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction* until 1997 when she resigned to devote more time to her own writing. At that time, she had already published more than 16 science fiction novels and been nominated for virtually all of science fiction's major awards. Full-time writing coincided for her with a move into mystery fiction. She is the author of *Hitler's Angel* (4/98).

The pretty had left her in 1977. Her boyfriend, Skeeter Jackson, had been holding a gun. It went off. The bullet hit Violet on the right side of her face, missing the brain—fortunately—but destroying the eye and shattering the bones in her cheek. Reconstructive surgery had helped—she didn't have to wear a patch or anything—but it didn't hide the unnatural smoothness of her skin, or the immobility of the glass eye.

She had grown used to her face, but most people were startled by it. By, her husband once said, its appearance of normality far away, and its strangeness up close.

He had liked the strangeness, even at first. It was one of the things she loved about him. That, and his unusual calm. His great warmth. His strength and his protectiveness.

Her mother used to say, *It's amazing what gifts tragedy brings us.*

"What a pile of crap," Violet muttered, just as if her mother were still alive and listening. "What an absolute pile of crap."

She didn't want to show Tom the pictures, but she did, within

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

minutes of his arrival at the house. He was a big man, broad-shouldered, with an athlete's build that belied his bookish nature. He carried brochures and papers from the auction houses and cleaning services in town and set them, surreptitiously, on the kitchen table. Then he had tucked a strand of hair behind her ear, looked at her face for a moment, and pulled her close.

She wasn't going to show him, she resolved then. She didn't want him to know what he had missed.

But he wanted to know what had disturbed her so, thinking it was her mother, assuming it was her mother, and Violet had said—no, yes, no, . . . ah hell, and pulled the pictures from the box.

They were different sizes—the school photo was large, and the rest were snapshots from various cameras, made at a time when that determined the size of the print. He gave each photo due consideration, studying it as if it were a window into another world. Then, as he finished, he gave each photo to her.

Her first prom, when she stood beside Skeeter, her robin's egg blue dress revealing a trim, delicate form that matched her delicate features. A laughing girl, sitting in a tree, the delicacy buried in bell-bottom jeans, sweatshirt jacket, and wide crinkly smile. The same girl, same tree, different jeans, different mood, brow furrowed as she concentrated on a book.

With each photo, her hand shook. Tom's familiar face, with its sun-wrinkles and age-softened skin, seemed unfamiliar as he looked through the pile. Then he stopped at her graduation photo, taken only weeks before the shooting.

Her auburn hair was in a pageboy without bangs, the ends turned under her ears. She wore no makeup—she didn't need any, not with her naturally rosy cheeks, her pink bow-shaped mouth, and her perfect skin. The green dress with its soft collar made her wide eyes look green as well.

Beautiful. She had been beautiful, not pretty. Tom would finally get to see what he had lost.

He wrapped an arm around her as if he had heard the thought. Then he set the photo down and pulled her close, kissing the top of her head. He put a finger beneath her chin, lifted her face to his, and pressed his lips against the smooth skin near the glass eye, the place where she had no feeling at all.

Yet she felt that kiss through every inch of her body, all the way to her soul.

The funeral home was two blocks from her mother's house. Violet walked to the visitation, enjoying the warm summer twilight, the faint hint of roses in the air. Her mother had liked winter, and had said just before she died that she was sorry to miss another one. But Violet liked summer, with its heat and its flowers and its

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

greenery. They had differed on so many things, but Violet knew that she would miss those differences for the rest of her life.

She had spent most of the afternoon finishing preparations for the visitation: viewing the body; making certain that her mother looked as normal as possible—whatever that meant; setting up the guest book, and making sure the flowers were arranged properly. The funeral home had been built in the 1960s and still reflected its origins. None of the decorations looked proper against the blue wallpaper and the blond wood.

Not that her mother would have cared. Her mother always understood the importance of making do. She had been a single mother long before such a thing was fashionable, working two jobs and trying to raise a daughter in a somewhat normal environment. Violet had hated it all, her mother's haste, the slapdash meals, the hard-fought home. More often than not, her mother dropped her at school while still wearing her robe and curlers. Violet always asked to be let out a block away so that no one saw.

Someday you're going to regret always thinking about how things look, Violet Marie, her mother had said a week before the shooting. Two months after, she had apologized, as if the injuries were her fault.

Even though Violet was early, there were still half a dozen cars in the funeral-home parking lot. Her mother had been well known and well liked in this small Wisconsin town near the Minnesota border. She had been the first woman CPA, the first woman to head an accounting firm, the first woman president of the chamber of commerce. The last illness had happened not because her mother was elderly, but because she hadn't been paying attention to her health. She had been too busy on a new project—helping the church buy a building big enough to house the town's first homeless shelter.

At least Tom was at the funeral home. He had brought his suitcoat with him so that he wouldn't have to go to the house and change. He had thought people would arrive early, and they had.

He had been a saint through all of this, something she wouldn't have expected. He had once told her that he hated funerals, hated the ritualized grief. Then his father had died, and he had learned why the rituals existed. Tom thought of things she wouldn't have considered, because he had experienced a parent's death already.

She let herself in the double doors, shocked at the darkness of the entry. The artificial lights were on, but they did not compare to the fading summer light outside. Piped-in piano music played hymns that Violet thought might be appropriate—her mother had only liked big bands, jazz, and swing tunes, and Violet couldn't play those here, not in this somber place. The air smelled of lilies and death.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

The guest book stood beside the door to the small chapel, and inside, her mother's open coffin was bathed in a yellow light. Three people stood before it, their gray heads bent over the open end as if they were praying. Tom sat in a pew, watching them.

She glanced at the guest book, saw seven names besides hers and Tom's, and didn't recognize any of them. That didn't surprise her; she had spent her youth here, but had been gone for twenty years—except for short visits in which she saw only her mother. Her mother had tried to keep her up on the news, but it soon became clear that Violet didn't care about any of it. Gradually, her mother only told Violet about the changes, and Violet had listened with half an ear.

She slipped into the pew beside Tom. He put his hand over hers, and together they watched as most of the town came to pay their respects to her mother. They heard stories about her mother's good works, about her sharp words, and about the battles she had fought and won. Only one person was tactless enough to mention the unwanted pregnancy and the mystery of Violet's father, and the kind way the event came up didn't bother Violet at all.

Toward the end of the visitation, she found herself in the foyer, surrounded by grieving people she only dimly remembered, and nodding to their words of comfort. She hadn't cried yet. She doubted she would, not in this place and probably not in the church during the following day's funeral. Instead, she planned to mourn her mother when she returned home to the safety of her own house, and the comfort of the things she found most dear.

Tom was talking to the funeral-home director, double-checking the arrangements for the body to be transferred to the church the following morning. She could hear their voices faintly beneath the conversational hum around her.

Then the door opened to reveal some final guests. Violet had been watching Tom; she hadn't seen who had arrived, but the growing silence caught her attention.

The man standing on the threshold was tall and well formed, with a short professional cut to his dark hair. He wore an obviously expensive charcoal gray suit with hints of black, and his diamond cufflinks caught the artificial light. He looked as adult as a thirty-eight-year-old man could, and yet she didn't see him that way. She saw him as he had been, a reed-thin boy, so thin that he had looked as if a single blow to the stomach would break him in half. His hair had been long and scraggly, the home cut overgrown already, a scuffed and cracked leather jacket around his shoulders, and his jeans dirt-caked and full of holes.

Skeeter Jackson. The boy who shot her.

The crowd parted to let him through. He ignored them, ignored

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

the guest book, and instead walked down the aisle toward the coffin. No one followed.

Violet didn't move. It felt as if every muscle had frozen. She was facing the chapel, so she could see him, and the people she had been talking to had turned slightly so that they could see him as well. Tom was across the room, frowning, looking worried. He would be at her side in a minute. He would be at her side and she would be safe.

Skeeter—surely no one called him that anymore; they probably used his real name, such a tame name: Stephen—stopped in front of the coffin and bowed his head. He stood there for a long time, undisturbed, the posture clearly that of a man who mourned. Skeeter had never been one who could hide his emotions. She remembered him, fiery and quick-tempered, just as quick to smile.

She remembered the gun in his left hand.

He took something from his suitcoat, and her muscles locked tighter. But all that emerged was a flower wrapped in cellophane. She squinted. It was a lilac branch. Lilacs were her mother's favorite flower. Where had he gotten that? There were no lilacs in Wisconsin in August. It must have cost him a small fortune.

He removed the cellophane, stuffed it in the right front pants pocket on his perfect suit, and then carefully, gently, set the branch in her mother's coffin.

No one spoke, but someone gasped. Tom was frowning at her. *She* had gasped. Tom excused himself from the funeral director and made his way to her side.

Skeeter's hand lingered in the coffin for a moment, almost as if he had caressed her mother's still face, and then he turned. His dark eyes met Violet's and held them. Tom came up behind her. She could feel his warmth through the thin material of her dress. He put a hand on her shoulder, claiming her.

Skeeter didn't seem to notice. He walked up the aisle, his gaze remaining on her. People parted so that they wouldn't have to get near him, or perhaps so that they could better see the coming interaction. Her throat locked, and the tears that had threatened since her mother's death suddenly seemed quite close.

It seemed to take him forever to come up that aisle. Finally he stepped into the foyer and stopped in front of her. His clothes were different, but his posture was the same: feet spread slightly in fighter stance, arms down, palms open, as if he were ready for anything that came at him. He smelled faintly of lilacs, and she realized that the branch he had placed in her mother's coffin hadn't been hothouse grown. It had been fresh.

"Violet," he said, and his deep, rich, warm voice—a musician's voice, with all the timbre and lyricism that implied—made her

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

shiver. Tom's grip tightened, and she knew what his face looked like without even seeing it: guarded, protective, warning.

Skeeter paused just a half-moment—or had it merely seemed like that to her? Then he said, "I'm sorry."

She opened her mouth, but nothing came out. She wasn't even sure what she would say, what she wanted to say. The moment stretched into an eternity, her gaze on Skeeter's just like it would have been so long ago.

"Thank you," Tom said finally.

Skeeter looked up at him as if seeing him for the very first time. Then he slipped around the people who had gathered and went out the main doors.

"Who was that?" Tom asked softly in Violet's ear. But she couldn't answer him, not here.

The funeral-home director turned to her, the fake compassion on his angular face unable to mask the interest in his eyes. "Would you like me to remove the flower, Mrs. Davies?" he asked.

The room remained silent. Everyone was still watching her, waiting, hoping to see—what? A breakdown?

"Mrs. Davies?" he asked again, as if she couldn't hear him even though he was only a few feet away. "Would you like—?"

"No," she said. Then she too slipped through the crowd and headed into the hot August night.

He was standing beside a sleek black Jaguar—not new, but an older model, one of the classics. His head was bowed and the yellow beams from the halogen streetlight above him painted streaks of gold in his shiny hair. He was holding a cigarette, rolling it over and over in his fingers like a magician would, a gesture she had seen countless times in other men's hands, a gesture that always made her think of him.

"I haven't held one of these in seventeen years," he said. "What is it about you, Violet, that makes me want a smoke?"

He hadn't looked up, yet he had known she was the one standing before him, the uncanny connection between them unbroken by time. The cigarette flowed from index finger to middle finger to ring finger and back again.

"I stayed in touch with your mother," he said. He raised his head. In the strange light, he looked even more like a boy. "There's a few things you should know. She—"

"No," Violet said. "I didn't come out here to talk to you."

He looked surprised by that, by her vehemence, by the bitterness that filled every word.

"Then why did you come?" he asked at last.

"To get away from them." She glanced back at the funeral home.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

It seemed as if she had been running from other people's gazes ever since she was seventeen years old.

"And your husband?"

"What about him?"

"Were you getting away from him, too?"

How could she explain life with Tom, the safety and security he gave her, the feeling of being completely and utterly loved? How could she explain the difference between that and the heady excitement, the razor's edge of danger that she had once felt with Skeeter?

She had been very young. Foolish, even.

She took the cigarette from his hand, brushing his warm skin. He glanced up at her, obviously surprised at even this casual touch. She dropped the cigarette and then ground it beneath the thin sole of her shoe.

"Don't ruin your life for me, Stephen," she said.

He stared at her for a moment, then smiled, that crooked sideways smile that even now made her heart lurch. "Don't worry, Violet Marie," he said. "Once was bad enough."

The house was still sticky with the afternoon heat. Violet opened the windows and set a fan before the patio doors, hoping to bring some cooler night air inside. Tom remained at the funeral home, although she expected him at any moment. She would apologize when he came and offer him some sort of explanation, although what kind she wasn't yet sure.

She went into the guest room and removed her dress, hanging it on a padded hanger that dated from the forties. Her hands were shaking. She had spoken to Skeeter Jackson. Finally, after all these years, she had found enough courage in herself to speak to him, to exchange words, to touch him. She felt sixteen again, and giddy with fear and excitement. How did he inspire that in her even now? She taught high school English to students she called "kids," who were so young that she considered them unworldly and naive. They called her "Mrs. Davies" and considered her so old she once heard an eleventh grader ask another when she had died.

When had she died?

She grabbed a T-shirt from her suitcase and slipped on a pair of jeans. She left her feet bare. When she was sixteen, she had spent all her free time with Skeeter Jackson and thought herself daring. She had learned how to hot-wire cars and siphon gas and hold a gun. She had learned how to spot a cop car from the position of its taillights, and she had learned how to pass for a woman ten years older so that she could get into bars. All the while, she had remained the model student and the perfect daughter. Her mother

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

was too busy to notice who Violet spent her evenings with, and Violet was too involved to mention it. Her mother hadn't even met Skeeter until two months before the shooting, when he came by during a small family reunion picnic wearing a blue nylon muscle shirt with small holes all the way through it, revealing his as-yet-unmuscled chest. He smelled of cigarettes and beer, with the faint hint of pot, unfamiliar odors at her house, and her mother had invited him to share some fried chicken and to meet the relatives.

He had. He had been personable and charming, and he had eaten as though he had never had a homemade meal before. Then he had left on his older brother's motorcycle, and her mother had watched him disappear.

"Looks like Vi has her own James Dean," her uncle Robert had said.

"Every girl needs one," her mother had said slowly, and then turned away. Everyone grew quiet, and Violet had known, from long practice, that her mother had just made a rare mention of her father.

She smoothed her hair back, felt the sweat on her scalp. She pulled open windows in the study and gazed out them at the funeral home, where there were still cars.

Skeeter's was gone.

Who would have thought that he would drive a Jag, that he would wear a suit that cost more than her monthly salary? He had come from one of the poorest neighborhoods. His sister had died two years after the incident, beaten to death by the local pimp. His brother ended up doing twenty to life for a series of burglaries, the last involving a gun and a motorcycle dealership. She had always assumed that Skeeter would end up the same way.

Skeeter. She would have to get him out of her mind. He no longer had a place in her life—he hadn't since the shooting. She was here to honor her mother, and to clean up the home her mother had lived in for forty years. Not to dwell on Skeeter Jackson.

She touched the smooth scar beside her eye, felt the reconstructed bone, wished she could remember more about the incident than she did. It was forever gone from her mind, just a tantalizing hint of the night—the new drug Skeeter's friend Jake brought, the buzzing, elliptical feeling that it gave her, the way the entire room seemed both larger and smaller. The sadness, the deep welling sadness, and the beauty of the gun in Skeeter's hand. And then there was nothing except pain, the incredible throbbing in her head that didn't leave for months—maybe, if she were honest, maybe even years. The hospital bed against her back, the pillow beneath her head, and the nurse's voice, Anita's voice, asking

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

her if she wanted flowers from Skeeter, and the way she had screamed then, remembering the gun and the pain and—

She shook it away. That was why she never thought of Skeeter. That was why she never saw anyone from this town, why she visited only her mother, and only then for short periods of time. Being trapped here for the week before her mother's death, and now for at least a week afterward, was like being in hell, and she had just had a vision of the devil himself.

The house was finally getting cooler. The streetlights had kicked on and given the room an odd sort of gray light. She flipped on the green desklamp that she had purchased for her mother on one of her last visits.

Her mother had kept her important papers in a box beside the narrow table she used as a desk. Beside the lamp were expensive pens—one of her mother's few indulgences—including a quill pen complete with inkwell. The makeshift desk had a blotter, unsoiled by doodles, and it also had account ledgers nearby, all of them neatly labeled by year.

Violet grabbed that year's ledger and opened it to the place marked by the ribbon. Her mother's handwriting, still the perfect cursive she had learned in grammar school six decades before, recorded each bill paid, whether for utilities or a credit card, and each check received from the Social Security stipend to her retirement. Her mother's bills had been up to date as of two weeks before. Despite her illness, she had sat at this desk and filled out that week's bills, making certain that she remained a responsible citizen all the way to the end.

The bills were small and inconsequential. The house payment was gone long ago. Violet thumbed through the ledger, looking for the tax payment to make sure the property taxes had been paid, and also to see what the county considered a fifty-year-old suburban ranch house to be worth. The farther back she went, the sturdier her mother's handwriting became. Cable, telephone, groceries, heat—fluctuating with the weather—electricity, insurance, gifts. The property tax payment might have been in the fall of the previous year. Her mother had enough money set aside; she had probably paid the bill the moment it was incurred. That had been how her mother had done things.

Violet removed the previous year's book and opened it to the ribbon marker. The only notation on that page was in red: underlined and followed by an exclamation mark. *Paid in full!* She turned to the previous page, and froze.

The notation was simple: *12/31 Stephen White Jackson (Loan: cf. 8/14/80) $42,125.14.* It was a payment to her mother of forty-two thousand dollars. The repayment of a loan her mother made to Skeeter three years after the shooting.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

The shaking had returned. Violet left the ledger open and rummaged until she found the 1980 volume. She found August easily and turned pages until she reached August 14. The notation was in the middle of a list of mundane bills, including one for Violet's medical expenses.

8/14 Stephen White Jackson—interest-free loan $10,000.

Interest-free. Given to Skeeter when Violet was attending college downstate and the other students were looking away from the angry redness that marred the right side of her face.

Why?

A door banged in the front of the house. Violet jumped, heart pounding.

"Violet?"

The voice was Tom's. She took a deep breath and put a hand over her stomach. She hadn't realized how tense she was until that moment.

"Violet?" he said again, and this time his voice was closer.

"In the study," she said.

He came in, blocking the door with his large build, and flicked on the overhead light. "How come the house is so dark?"

She blinked at the brightness. "I was looking through Mom's financial records."

"You didn't have to do that tonight."

"I couldn't do anything else," she said. Her voice sounded strained and strange to her own ears.

He hadn't moved, as if her strangeness had put a wall between them. How hard this had to be on him. He had known her mother for fourteen years and had respected her. He had to have some feelings about her death as well, but he never spoke of them, instead taking care of Violet, letting her needs come first.

He was a caring man. He had always been. That was part of the attraction for her. He was the only man she had met since the shooting who made her feel as if she were the most important woman on earth.

"I found something," she said softly, unable, as usual, to keep something from him.

He came in the room almost too quickly, as if he had been waiting for an invitation. He put a hand on her shoulder. "What did you find?"

"Mom loaned Stephen Jackson ten thousand dollars in nineteen eighty." Her voice was shaky and brittle, rather like she felt.

"Stephen Jackson? The man at the funeral home?" Tom was pretending ignorance, but she could tell that someone had already told him who Skeeter was.

"Yes," she said. "He paid her back in full and with interest last year. I don't know how long he'd been paying her before that."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Why is that important?" Tom's question wasn't about the payments. It was about the loan.

"Stephen is the one who shot me," she said, marveling that she couldn't keep anything from Tom now, but that she had never told him that detail before.

His hand tightened on her shoulder. "Then why did you let him in the funeral home?"

"I didn't have a choice. It's a public place."

"No," Tom said. "It's not."

"Mom lent him ten thousand dollars interest-free. That had to be some of the money she inherited from Grammy. And she did it three years after the shooting, about the time Skeeter—Stephen—would have been released from jail."

"Why would she do that?" Tom asked.

Violet ran a finger across the old notation, feeling the impressions left by her mother's pen so long ago. "I don't know."

"And your mother never said anything?"

Violet shook her head. Then she frowned. "But Skeeter did. He said tonight that he had stayed in touch with Mother, that there were a few things I should know."

"You spoke to him?" Tom sounded alarmed.

Violet turned slightly in the chair. The desk lamp illuminated Tom's face, made it seem even paler than it really was. "He was in the parking lot."

"Waiting for you."

She hadn't thought of it that way, but he probably had been. "I don't know," she said.

"And you spoke to him?"

"I told him I didn't want to. I left him there. He didn't have a chance to tell me whatever it was he started to say."

"He'll tell me," Tom said. He was starting to bluster, his grip on her shoulder too tight, his body growing tense.

"No," Violet said.

"He will." Tom seemed to grow taller. He knew how to use his build to advantage.

"He might," Violet said, "but it doesn't matter anymore, don't you see? Whatever was between them was finished last year. The loan was marked paid in full." She smiled ruefully. "And emphasized with an exclamation point."

"But it's got you upset," Tom said.

"Mother's got me upset," Violet said. "Skeeter Jackson is simply part of my past."

The following morning was too beautiful for a funeral. The sky was a light blue, the sun bathing everything in a soft golden light. The day promised to be hot, but the type of heat that made Violet

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

think of spreading a beach towel, grabbing a fat novel, and spending the afternoon on a nearby beach, listening to children scream and splash in a lake. Instead, she would be wearing her new black dress, listening to condolences, and sitting on a narrow pew in a church she hadn't attended since she was seventeen years old.

Tom had gotten up before her. He had cleaned out the car and taken it to a nearby gas station for a wash so that everything looked good for the funeral procession. He had pressed his own suit, something he hadn't done since they were married, and then made her breakfast. He had even put the ledgers away.

It felt odd to be in her mother's house, eating from her mother's dishes, drinking her mother's coffee, without her mother standing near the sink or reading the newspaper in her chair by the window. The house was quiet and there seemed to be a waiting in the stillness, as if her mother would come through the door at any moment and flick on the television.

Violet hadn't slept much, and she had gotten up twice so that her tossing and turning wouldn't wake up Tom. They were crammed together in the sleeper/sofa, neither of them willing to take over the queen-sized bed her mother had slept in. As dawn had arrived, Violet had stood before the living room window staring at the street. She could remember it in a million incarnations—with snow blocking the view, with a line of blooming roses between their house and the neighbor's, with children skating on a thick yellow plane of ice. She had walked down that street with every boyfriend she had ever had—except Tom—and she had held various hands, kissed her first kiss beneath a long-gone maple, ran back from the seventh-grade Christmas Dance excited because Scotty Turine had danced with her.

Her sixteenth year, the boy who kissed her beneath the maple had been Skeeter. He had also been the first to touch her breasts, the first to see her naked, the first to discover the small mole above her heart. He had been very tender, and had shown remarkable restraint for a boy his age; he had been afraid of getting her pregnant, of having them turn out like his parents had turned out: married at sixteen, parents at seventeen, divorced by twenty. She had seen him as her savior and protector then, much as she saw Tom now, only with Skeeter it had ended horribly, shattered in a night she could barely remember.

And then she hadn't seen him again, until the night before her mother's funeral.

I stayed in touch with your mother.

And her mother had never said a word. She had loaned him what to them was a small fortune—which he had repaid at more than four times the original amount—and she had never mentioned that either. With that one single notation, her mother had

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

become as strange to Violet as the road. Familiar only in memory, the details now tainted by a slightly different light.

Finally Violet had taken an aspirin, her mother's old remedy for sleeplessness, and had fallen into a deep, dreamless sleep. She hadn't felt Tom leave to do his errands, waking only when the delicious odors of bacon and coffee tantalized her nose.

Somehow she made it through the hours before the funeral, arriving at the church to find a group of elderly women in the basement cutting sheet cakes and making more coffee. She had waved hello to Anita, a Ladies Auxiliary member who had also been the nurse who had cared for her during those awful weeks in the hospital. Anita had smiled back, wiped her hands on a towel, and seemed about to come over, when Violet was called upstairs to greet some of the first arrivals.

The funeral itself was short; her mother had insisted on a standard religious ceremony. From the phone calls Violet had received in the days since her mother's death, it seemed that her mother's friends would have preferred the memorial service. They all wanted to stand up and give testimonials to her place in their lives. She had had to turn them all down, and give the remembrance of her mother to a minister that Violet had never met.

He acquitted himself well. He spoke of her mother's life and her friendships and her generous nature; he only spoke of God a few times, and then in the proper context. The prayer was one that Violet herself had offered up every day since her mother's death but had not acknowledged, a prayer that her mother would be as well received in the afterlife as she had been in this one. The music was beautiful, the service mercifully short, and Violet had only used one purse-sized box of Kleenex: a victory, she thought. Her Midwestern roots showed in that; she wanted to do her crying in the privacy of her own home.

She didn't notice how full the church was until the ceremony was over. Every pew was filled, and part of the balcony as well. Most of the mourners went to the basement, while a select few attended the graveside service. Violet watched as her mother's casket was lowered into a dark hole beside her grandparents' graves, beneath a cottonwood tree that was shedding tiny white seedlings. It looked as if God had decided to create snow in August, just to honor her mother and her love of winter.

That thought, more than anything else, made Violet cry.

By the time she returned to the church, her eye and nose were swollen, and a new coat of makeup couldn't hide the redness in her skin. But she put on what Tom called her company face and went to greet all the people who had come to acknowledge her mother and see her safely home.

As Violet started down the stairs, she heard the rumble of con-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

versation. There was little laughter, but there was warmth. The air smelled of coffee, and she found that soothing. She rounded the corner, and saw that the dining room was full. The long blond tables were covered with paper tablecloths. On them, the Ladies Auxiliary had placed silver bowls filled with mint candies and peanuts, platters with tiny cake squares, and the china coffee cups that were designated only for special occasions. Each table had one Auxiliary member stationed in the middle: It was her job to pour and to make certain the food supplies remained.

Most of the mourners stood in small clusters. A handful sat at tables, mostly the older ones, and all around her, she heard her mother's name mentioned with affection. People were telling stories, and she wished she could simply flit from group to group to hear those stories without tainting them by her presence.

She took a cup of coffee and a piece of chocolate sheet cake with whipped cream frosting just before she saw him, standing in the back. He was wearing the same suit he had worn the night before, but he wore a black shirt and matching black tie that somehow made him look even more expensive. A few people were talking to him, but he wasn't listening.

He was staring at her.

Warmth flooded her face. Tom took her arm. He followed her gaze. "I'll make him go."

She shook her head. "They clearly knew each other. He has as much right to be here as anyone."

"He bothers you. I don't think your mother would have wanted that."

Obviously not. Her mother had kept her entire relationship with Skeeter secret, and she had probably done that so that she wouldn't upset Violet. It was too late now; Violet was upset. There was nothing anyone could do to change that.

"Let him be," she said wearily. "We won't see him after today."

Tom harrumphed as he always did when he disagreed with her, then he went to a nearby table to get his own coffee and snack. She would have to keep an eye on him; when they disagreed this badly he often took matters into his own hands. Whatever her mother would have wanted, it wouldn't have been a scene at the reception following her own funeral.

Several women came up to Violet and told her how wonderful her mother had been and how much they'd miss her. She smiled and nodded and spoke to them softly, unable to remember their names. Others came to her as well, and the hour passed quickly. People had their coffee and their memories and their moment to tell Violet what they would have said at the memorial service, and then they left to go on with their lives.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

She would have to reconstruct hers. But she had done that before. She was an expert at picking up the pieces.

"Violet?"

She started, even though she was prepared to hear his voice, even though she knew it would come. She heard his voice in her dreams sometimes, its warmth, its tenderness. Its fear.

She turned. He was standing so close to her that it took her breath away. How could a man's face remain essentially unchanged after twenty years of living? His eyes had the same vulnerability, his lips the same self-conscious quirk, his skin the same lucent quality that it had always had.

"I don't think this is a good idea." Tom had come up beside her. He put his arm around her, pulling her close.

Skeeter didn't look at him. "Violet, please. I've respected your wishes not to see me for the last seventeen years. At least let me talk to you now."

"I don't think what you have to say matters," Violet said. "We won't see each other again."

"It matters to me."

"She doesn't want to listen to you," Tom said. "And I don't think she has to listen to the guy who shot her, not on the day of her mother's funeral. Not ever."

Skeeter's beautiful eyes widened. He looked at her, then at him, then at her again. "Is that what you told him? That I shot you?"

"You did," she whispered.

His lower lip trembled. For a moment she thought he wasn't going to be able to speak. Then he said: "Violet, what purpose does lying serve? Especially now?"

"Don't call her a liar," Tom said.

Violet put her arm around him, in part to hold him in place, and in part to maintain her own balance.

"He didn't shoot you, Violet Marie." A quavering voice spoke behind her, and for half a moment, Violet thought that it belonged to her mother. She glanced over her shoulder and saw Anita, the head nurse of the children's wing of Sacred Heart. She had spent as much time in Violet's hospital room as her mother and grandparents, holding her hand and telling her that there was more to life than a pretty face.

Once Violet had awakened to see Anita holding Violet's sobbing mother. *I don't know how she'll live like that,* her mother had whispered. *I don't know how to give her a future anymore.*

Just be thankful she's alive, honey, Anita had said. *A quarter-inch to the left and you wouldn't have to worry about nothing 'cept how to bury her.*

"You never got your memory back," Anita said, "did you, honey?"

Violet felt the flush in her face grow deeper. "No." Then she

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

looked at Skeeter. "But I remember you holding the gun."

"I took it away from you twice," he said softly.

"But you went to jail."

"Juvie," he said. "For the drugs."

The drugs. They had been such a part of that night. They had been such a part of that year. Her mother hadn't known, not until the accident, and even then she hadn't wanted to believe.

"He pushed the gun away from you," Anita said. "You kept staring down the barrel."

"How do you know?" Tom's voice was so low as to be menacing. Violet tightened her grip on him. His presence was good for her, his voice echoing her thoughts. How would Anita know? How would anyone know except Violet and Skeeter?

"There was a witness," Anita said.

Jake. Jake who had brought the drugs. Jake who had been laughing when she took out the gun the first time. "What happened to him?" Violet asked Skeeter.

"Joliet," Skeeter said. "Trafficking charge."

"He lied for you," Tom said.

"He wouldn't lie for anyone," Skeeter said. "I barely knew him. Don't you think they investigated? A good girl like her, a boy like me. It was his gun, and she had the powder burns on her arm."

"Skeeter," Violet said.

"Stephen," he corrected. "Stephen now."

"You didn't try to see me."

"I was arrested," he said. "I had my brother get you flowers with money I should have used for the lawyer, but they got sent back."

"They made you scream," Anita said to Violet, and she remembered those, like she remembered the gun. And Skeeter's name, along with the pain.

She closed her eyes. Tom tightened his grip.

"Then when I got out," Skeeter said, "your mother said you were gone. And she wouldn't help me find you. She said you refused to talk about what happened, that you'd scream or cry or leave the room whenever someone mentioned my name."

"But she gave you money," Tom said. "To stay away."

Violet opened her eyes. So that was why. To keep her safe. The explanation felt good.

But it also felt wrong.

Skeeter—Stephen—shook his head. "She gave me money," he said, "to go to college."

Violet leaned into Tom. She felt her breath stop in her throat, her body so tense that she seemed frozen in place once more.

Stephen misunderstood her silence. "She was a good woman, your mother," he said. His nose was turning red. "She told me that I had a choice. She said I could be like my brother or my sister or

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

my friends, and end up in prison for the rest of my life, or I could make something out of myself. She said no one would take me as a risk now, that I wouldn't be able to get aid or help or maybe even a job, not yet. So she loaned me the money. She put it in an account and paid my tuition and my room and board and my books, and she told me that it was an interest-free loan, and she said I didn't have to pay it back if I made something out of myself. And I did. I own a chain of restaurants in Minneapolis, and they're well known, reviewed in all the best magazines. I paid her back. All of it, a little at first, then the full amount last December. I paid her back with interest, and she didn't want the money, but I had to, Violet Marie. I had to. Don't you see? She gave me my life back. The only thing she couldn't give me was you."

He reached out to touch the right side of her face, the ruined side, and Tom caught his hand.

"No," Violet said, bringing her own hand up to grab theirs. Stephen's fingers were cold, Tom's were warm, and the single fist they made was too big for her small hand. "Tom, let me talk to Stephen."

"Violet—"

"Please," she said.

He let Stephen's hand go, then pulled her against him. She could feel his heart pounding, saw in his face his desire to stay. But this wasn't about him. It hadn't been about him from the start.

Finally he let her go and then he went into the hall. Anita smiled at Violet, then followed, picking up Tom's coffee cup as she went.

"Protective," Stephen said.

Violet nodded. Tom had always been protective. She had liked that. It had made her feel safe. Safe, she used to think, from the Skeeters of the world. But Skeeter had protected her, too. She simply hadn't remembered, that's all. How strange her memory was, how fickle, and her mother had never contradicted her, had simply let her go on, just as she was supposed to.

"What happened?" she whispered.

Stephen stuck his hands in his pockets, ruining the lines of his suit. "Jake brought the LSD, and it was a better grade than we were used to. You went first, and it was clear right off the trip would be messy. You got Jake's gun. You thought it was so beautiful. You kept staring down the barrel, and Jake kept saying, 'Take it away from her, man.' So I did. Twice. And you kept reaching for it, like a baby seeing something pretty. Finally something else caught you and I thought it was safe. I was about to get high myself when I saw you had the gun. Your finger was on the trigger. I shoved it away—"

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

He stopped, swallowed, shook his head. She felt as if she were encased in glass.

"I'll never know," he whispered, "if I'm the one who made the gun go off."

She turned away from him. She had to find a chair. Her legs wouldn't hold her any longer. There were still some folding chairs out, metal, sturdy. The Auxiliary was cleaning up the cake. She and Skeeter—Stephen—were the only mourners left in the room.

"Mother knew," she said.

"Everyone knew," he said. "Jake ran, but it didn't take the cops long to find him. I went to the hospital with you. I thought you were dead."

She tried to see it from his perspective, the only one still sober in the room, the blood, the fear. But she couldn't. She still remembered the gun, and how pretty it looked. That memory had never gone away.

"I don't even drink anymore," she said.

He smiled. It was a sad smile. "I don't either."

"Mother forgave you."

He grabbed another chair, pulled it close, sat on it backwards so that he could rest his arms on its top. "She said it was all our faults. Her for not watching you more closely, me for buying drugs, and you for being stupid enough to try them."

Violet swallowed. Her mother had never spoken that candidly to her. Had she?

"I still think it was me, Violet. You wouldn't have done it without me. Without my contacts. Without Jake and his gun."

He had lived with this as long as she had, and it had scarred him just as it had her. Only he hadn't found someone like Tom, someone who had told him that the scars were a part of him, and beautiful for that reason alone.

"I'm sorry, Violet Marie," Skeeter said. "I've been wanting to say that for twenty years. I'm so very sorry."

She had her hands clasped in her lap. She unthreaded her fingers, extended her right arm, and took his left hand. Then she placed it against her ruined cheekbone. He touched the scar gingerly, as if it still hurt her. She put her hand on top of his, and pressed it against her skin.

"We were young," she said. "Stupid. We've lived with this every day. Mother did her best to make sure there was no damage."

"There's always damage," he said.

"But it heals," she said.

He bowed his head. "I wanted to say thank you to her. I wanted there to be a memorial service so that I could let everyone know just what she did."

Violet swallowed hard, the lump in her throat so large she

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

almost couldn't move it. "I don't think she wanted anyone to know what she did. I think that's why she wanted the ceremony she had. She always kept secrets. Your loan. My father. God knows how many others there were."

He didn't speak for a long moment. Dishes clattered in the kitchen, and a woman sang, softly, one of the hymns from the service.

Then he raised his head. "I loved you, Violet."

She stared at him for a moment. There were lines on his skin, visible in the fluorescent light of the church basement, sorrow lines around his eyes, worry lines around his mouth. The boy was there, but hidden in the man's face.

"I loved you too, Skeeter," she said. Then she kissed his wrist, let go of his hand, and stood. She ran her fingers through his still-thick dark hair, wondering what would have happened without the drugs, the gun, the shooting. Wondering if he would have a chain of restaurants, and she would be content with teaching children how to enjoy their lives.

She doubted it. She wondered if this was what her mother had spoken of, whenever she mentioned the gifts that tragedy could bring. How strange to think of it in a different context. Violet had always thought her mother had been referring to Violet's birth.

Stephen smiled at her, nodded, as if he knew that the conversation was at an end. There was nothing more that they could say to each other. They would never exchange addresses or phone numbers or pleasantries. There was too much between them for that.

She left him sitting alone in that large room, empty chairs around him.

As she stepped outside, the heat of the day wrapped itself around her like a hug. The sun had lost some of its brilliance and had gained a midafternoon diffuseness. Tom stood at the edge of the parking lot, beneath an oak tree whose roots were pushing through the concrete. He was rocking on the fissure like a boy.

She walked up to him and put her arms around him. He held her for a long time, his face in her hair, and she could feel him shaking. What had he been afraid of? That Skeeter would hurt her? That she would leave without him, chasing a shattered dream?

Finally Tom let her go. "What happened?" he asked.

She slipped her hand through his, and led him to the car. "I'll tell you," she said, "when we get home."

Her mother's home, where there were pictures of a pretty girl that Tom hadn't known, where there were ledgers filled with secrets that Violet wasn't sure she wanted to find.

But she would find them. They were all there, waiting for her, and she didn't need to fear them anymore.

The first one taught her that. ●

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

A View of the Sea

by Carmen Iarrera

This month *EQMM* debuts a contributor from Italy. Known in her own country as a first-rate author of spy novels—the only Italian woman working in the genre!—Carmen Iarrera is the winner of Italy's *Gran Giallo Cattolica* award. In addition to writing fiction, Ms. Iarrera works as a journalist and translator. We extend an enthusiastic welcome to a writer we hope to see more of in the U.S.

The apartment had only three rooms, neither big nor little, one after another, as was the custom long ago.

It had high ceilings, wooden floors that sloped slightly, and a bathroom tiled with little sea-green ceramics replaced here and there with some darker ones.

The kitchen, at the end of the last room, was tiled in green too, but the ceramics were bigger, hardly reaching halfway up the wall, and had by then lost all their brightness.

The apartment was at the top of a high and narrow building, without an elevator, which when it had been built was at the extreme end of the suburbs, almost in the country. Now it was near the center of the city, linked as it was, luckily, by a wide and flowing road.

He had seen that menacing and shouting city get closer day by day, and had defended himself by sheltering more and more in that apartment, in those rooms where he lovingly piled books upon books, as if building a barricade.

But he wasn't unsocial. No, he wasn't unsocial at all.

Because of his loneliness or because of his generosity, ever since he had reached the age limit and been pensioned off his old work as an elementary school teacher, he had begun to devote himself to the numerous children and grandchildren of his neighbors.

He had taught them to read and to write, and he had come to be a party to their little secrets. Sometimes, when his poor pension allowed it, he would even provide them with the money for some humble pleasure. A comic strip, new colored pencils, and, as they grew up, some gas for the scooter or money for a pizza.

©1999 by Carmen Iarrera

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Those boys and girls had almost become his family, his children.

He lived serenely, "breathing the air of youth" as he always said. He felt useful, a part of life, a part of the world. And, most of all, a part of that old apartment to which he was as devoted as if it was a human being with whom he had shared all his life, almost all his love.

He had come to know that apartment's merits and defects, and had come to love them both. He used to smile when he heard the pipes gurgling as the heater was turned off and the water, calming down, became cold.

He used to accept quietly the menacing northern wind, whistling as it threaded its way through the cracks in the bathroom window, and the creaking of the bedroom door that always got stuck in the old, warped frame.

He seemed to understand the living room light switch's reasons when it needed a little second stroke, almost an encouragement, to decide to illuminate the old shelves overflowing with books.

But most of all, he liked, or rather, loved, the huge window that opened wide on the view of the sea.

When he didn't read or was not busy with some little thing, he always found himself there. In winter, behind the glass, clouding it with his weak breath, scanning the gray faraway water. In summer, with his elbows on the worn window sill, breathing the salty air that happened to reach him when a particularly furious wave dashed against the light reefs.

It was that window that had conquered him, that made him decide, many, many years before, to move into this apartment—so far from the school—which his cousin, emigrating to America, definitely didn't want to entrust to any stranger.

"It's ill-omened," his cousin said repeatedly, to convince him. "It's ill-omened to give one's home to the first comer. It must be you to live in it. Give me this present. Let me leave for New York with my heart at peace."

And he, bewitched by his cousin's window, which at that time brought the pungent jasmine scent through the rooms, had said yes. Yes, because of that view of the sea.

But it was just that view of the sea that sentenced him.

His cousin, peace be with him, had become a mason from a bricklayer, then a small contractor, then the head of a large firm.

His cousin had made his fortune, and he died without ever having come back from America. Alive, it goes without saying, for he had made his son promise him solemnly that he would bury him "at home," in the little white cemetery facing the sea.

Superstition had made him fear that, otherwise, his soul would wander in the next world, as he had been obliged to do in this one, among unknown, foreign people.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

His cousin had always been superstitious, as were all the people he knew, obliged by the tiring precariousness of life to grasp for hopes made of strange rites and coral amulets.

He had never wanted to yield to that little comfort, even though he was resigned to be pulled at the sleeve by a dismayed acquaintance every time he was about to pass unconcerned under a ladder or didn't turn back abruptly before a little black cat.

He had also, again and again, tried to persuade "his children" to free themselves from that strange kind of minor religion, that kind of pagan superstition. In vain.

His cousin, on the contrary, had evidently got hold of that strange idea about his burial from pure superstition and had made, in death, that very last journey.

But the little white cemetery was not there anymore, and neither were the kitchen gardens red with pomegranate trees.

The city, moving forward voraciously, had swallowed everything. And his cousin, poor man, had been buried in the new cemetery. If one could say "buried," for he was actually set in a kind of grey concrete beehive, more or less at a second-floor height. That day, at the end of the funeral ceremony and of the usual condolences, he abruptly discovered himself unable to say anything to that tall and dark young man who, according to the old family ties, should be something of a distant nephew. He didn't remind him at all of that sulky baby who, in his father's arms, waved his little hand slowly to say goodbye to him from the highest deck of the ship.

Now that young man behaved self-confidently, like a beautiful male animal that knows it is strong and agile. Made self-confident by a well-cut suit, and a first-rate education, by the wealth his father had accumulated. Made almost impudent, relieved by the knowledge that he belonged, by then, to another world, which was different, both far away and ruled by different judgments and values.

But a relative who comes from far away must be attended to anyhow, and so he had insisted that, as his cousin's son had lodged in a hotel, the best in town, of course, he should at least come and have a coffee at his place.

Because for a long, a very long time, he had considered the apartment to be his.

And the American man, as he used to name his cousin's son to himself, was bewitched by that window, by that restless and foaming sea.

"This apartment, with such a view and so near the center of the city, it must be worth a lot," he cried out immediately. "Such a view of the sea is priceless!"

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

He had felt a cold spasm in the pit of his stomach, but had decided to take that exclamation as the statement of a young man who was used to making plans, used to pulling down and to rebuilding, and so he had answered with a smile. Besides, he knew that the American man had in his pocket a ticket to leave the next morning.

But, on the next day, toward evening, while he, at the window, was gazing at the red and perfect disk of the sun that slowly sank into a strangely still sea, the American had come back.

Quickly and efficiently, without even sitting down, the cousin's son had explained to him that he had thought a lot about it, that it seemed absurd to him to leave such a promising asset so unemployed, that he had decided to sell the apartment.

The American was sure he would have no ground for protest, as he had enjoyed it for years at a paltry price. He wasn't like his father, he couldn't afford to be sentimental. Business is business and money must make money. Otherwise, he had quietly explained, it would all come to an end.

Yes, an end, his end, because he knew for sure, for a certainty, that nothing in the world could change this: that he, out of that apartment, far from "his children," would not be able to survive.

He wrote this, modestly and with trouble, in a short letter with shaky handwriting that was immediately delivered by hand to the American's hotel.

In response, he got another letter, on paper with the letterhead of the city's most famous lawyer. It was his eviction notice. And it was immediate, due to defaulting on his debt.

Defaulting? Why, since it had been his cousin, with an unexpected Christmas call, who told him not to worry, not to send any more money because he didn't need that money anymore and, above all, that he wouldn't have so long to live and would leave that apartment to him?

It could be his cousin had forgotten that promise but, in any case, he died without making his will. It was logical. Superstition, again. Because making a will means thinking about death, and one must never think about death, and above all never challenge it by trying to put in order what it will leave after its occurrence.

It's ill-omened.

Eviction due to defaulting on a debt. The beginning of a series of troubles including lawyers' fees, useless petitions, law officers knocking peremptorily at the door. A series of troubles made more painful by the compassion that he saw in the eyes of "his children" and above all by the strange reaction of the apartment itself. Yes, because he had the painful sensation that the house had withdrawn into itself, as a person who knows that he has wronged you yet doesn't know any longer how to respond to a love that has

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

lasted unchanged and steady in spite of it all. The apartment was no longer itself. Living there was, by that time, like living with a stranger. A silent and guarded stranger that warily avoids even the shyest caress.

His perfect little world, patiently built up along the years, fell to pieces all around him at a dizzying speed. Not even the pipes gurgled anymore. And from the window, with his eyes blinded by tears of pain and rage, he was no longer able to see the sea.

This wasn't living anymore.

And he didn't.

The scarlet rivulet of blood made its way along the slightly sloping wooden floors. It passed under the door and slid across the landing, and thickened along the edge of the first step. Then the blood overflowed, drop by drop, down the stairs. "His children" found him sitting in the armchair, in front of the wide-open window, with an expression of endless sadness on his face and the veins of his wrist cut.

The story of that sad death spread everywhere, to the schools in the neigborhood, to the shops and the houses. Reached the city, the offices and the big stores, the markets and the workshops. It traveled in the buses and on the trolley cars. It was carried around by the taxis.

It was told by "his children," in the smallest detail, to everybody who drew near the house to inquire about that apartment for sale.

And nobody, in that country of superstitious people, ever ventured to buy an apartment in which a man had killed himself so sadly. ●

NOTE TO READERS: *Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine* is now on the Web! In addition to excerpts of upcoming fiction, our page provides a short history of the magazine and a list of *EQMM*'s many awards. We share the site with *Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine* and *Mystery Scene Magazine,* and links have already been established with several other mystery pages. It's *the* web site for mystery fans: Don't miss it! Visit us at http://www.mysterypages.com

CUSTOMER SERVICE OR SUBSCRIBER ASSISTANCE

Please direct all changes of address and subscription questions to:

ELLERY QUEEN
P.O. Box 54052, Boulder, CO 80322-4052

For change of address, please advise 6 to 8 weeks before moving.
Send your current mailing label with new address.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

DEPARTMENT OF FIRST STORIES

BLANK CHECK

by David Terrenoire

You hear people, the same people who say how nice things were before you moved here, complain about the alienation of America. Nobody knows their neighbors, they say. We're indifferent to the needs of our fellow creatures, they say.

Well, I say bunk.

Richard at the video store knows the movies I like. Steve at the liquor store knows what I drink. And the guy at the pawn shop, Phil's his name, knows just the caliber of pistol I need.

I went in one day and looked at the handguns. I'd never owned one before and all I knew, I knew from the movies. Phil was very helpful. First, he asked me if I had a permit.

"A permit?"

"You need a permit to buy," Phil told me. "Can't show you a pistol without a permit." Phil pointed to the sign on the wall that read "No Permit, No Pistol." I asked him if I had to take a class or something.

"Nah," Phil said, "you just go down to the courthouse, fill out an application, and they check, make sure you're not a wacko."

"Oh, then, that's okay." I wandered over to a glass case full of six-shooters. Some big, some little. "Uh, they don't call your home or anything, do they?" I tried to sound nonchalant, man-about-townish.

"They ask for references. You got references?"

"I know Richard at the video store," I said. "And I know you." I held out my hand. "My name's Larry."

Phil shook my hand. His was warm and dry. Mine was wet. Phil wiped his palm on his pants. I didn't take offense. "Nice meetin'

A North Carolina native who did his stint in the army in the early '70s, in Central America, David Terrenoire has made his living as an editor, railroad worker, short-order cook, and, recently, as a writer for an advertising agency. He continues to live in North Carolina, with his wife and daughter, and we believe (and hope) he is hard at work developing his considerable talent for fiction.

©1999 by David Terrenoire

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

you, Larry," he said. Phil looked around the store. We were the only two there. "Since we're friends, I guess it wouldn't hurt to show you a few firearms, would it, Larry?"

I said that was very considerate of him but I didn't want to get him into hot water with the management, and Phil said to fornicate the management.

"So what're you looking for, Larry?"

"I don't know, Phil," I said.

"Well, you gonna carry, Larry?"

I shook my head.

"You a target shooter?"

"No."

"And I'm guessing you're not a hunter," Phil said, and he laughed. But friends have to forgive friends these little slights. "So," Phil said, "I'm figuring you want a little pistol to use around the house, am I right?"

I backed away from the case and said, calm as I could, "Why would you say that, Phil?"

"Home defense," Phil said. "Protect the missus and little Larrys. God knows you can't depend on the cops."

"Oh," I said. "Home defense."

"The sheriff'll ask you," Phil said.

"He will?" A little zing of alarm ran up and tickled my scalp.

"When you apply for the permit," Phil said, "they'll ask."

I started breathing again. "Home defense," I said, and in a way, it was true. "So, do you recommend something, Phil? I like that one there." I pointed to a shiny gun that looked like the guns TV cops carry.

"Smith and Wesson thirty-eight special," Phil said. He pulled it out, flipped open the round thing that holds the bullets, and looked inside. Then he handed it to me.

"The bullets go in there," Phil said. He pointed with his finger. "You, uh, thinking of taking a class?"

"No, should I?"

"Up to you." Phil shrugged.

"How much does a gun like this run, Phil?"

"Oh, let's see." Phil squinted at a paper tag attached to the gun by a string. "It's used, so I can let it go for, say, two fifty."

"Two hundred and fifty dollars," I said, trying not to sound surprised. I sighted down the barrel at the stereo shelves and went "pa-kew, pa-kew."

Phil took the pistol and put it back into the case. I said I'd be back and left the pawnshop. In the car I kept repeating, "Two hundred and fifty dollars," hoping the chant would make it seem less somehow, make it seem within my grasp. Because I liked the way that pistol felt in my hand. I did.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

But two hundred and fifty dollars is a lot of dollars.

I'm not allowed to have money. My wife says I'd spend it on something stupid. So I have to squirrel it away, like in change, or I use coupons at the grocery and pocket the difference and pray she doesn't check. Or, when I get expense checks for running some errand for Mr. Lesley, I don't put them into the checking account. I cash them. This way I'm not stealing. I'm not taking my wife's money. I'm just keeping a double ledger, like I do at work. Like film studios I read about in *TV Guide*. Did you know Warner Brothers still hasn't made a profit on *The Rockford Files?* Who are they kidding?

But two hundred and fifty dollars. That's a lot of errands.

I was late getting back to work and Mr. Lesley was in my office, sitting at my desk. He had that dried-up look on his face. I hate that look. I mean, I really, really hate that look. Sometimes I try to give him that look right back but he never catches on. Once he asked me if I had gas.

"You're late," Mr. Lesley said.

And you're a butthole, I wanted to say. But instead I said, "I'm sorry, Mr. Lesley, I was running an errand for my wife."

"That's what they make personal time for. Personal time. For personal errands. But this is my time. I pay for this time. I own this time. Do you understand? The time you're spending is my time," he said, "not your time. That means you're stealing from me, doesn't it? Time, that is. And what do they say, Larry?"

"Time is money, Mr. Lesley." Just saying it made my shoulders droop like I was some whupped dog.

"And when you steal my time, you steal what, Larry?"

"Your money, Mr. Lesley."

"Exactly. Which makes you a thief, Larry. Only a thief steals money."

If he only knew, I thought. "Yes, Mr. Lesley," I said. "It won't happen again."

"Good. Now, my boy, Weston, has a term paper due tomorrow."

"Yes, sir."

"It's on amoebas. You know anything about amoebas, Larry?"

"No, sir."

"Well, you will. And make sure it's better than that piece you did on the Pharaohs. Nobody cares about the damn cat mummies. Not seventeen pages' worth. Jesus, the teacher almost had the boy labeled ADD. I don't want him labeled ADD, all right, Larry?"

"ADD students get unlimited time to complete their SATs," I said. "Think of the advantage." I got that dried-up look again, his lips all sucked inward like his head was a vacuum.

I drove the Vega down to the public library, which was located right next to the county courthouse. Before I researched the report, I stole a little of Mr. Lesley's time to go inside and sign up

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

for a gun permit. I had to go through a metal detector like they have in airports. The guard had me stripped almost to my boxers before I remembered my watch.

I found the sheriff's office in the basement. I stood at a low rail. Two ladies, one white and one black, sat at desks facing one another, talking about a woman they both knew. Neither liked her much. After hearing about how the woman's underwear was found in the back of a local lawyer's Lincoln, I waved my hand. That caught their eye. They stared at me as if I was intruding, which I guess I was, and I apologized and asked for a permit to buy a pistol. The white woman got up and handed me a sheet of paper. Her white hair looked so dry I was afraid it was a fire hazard, like national parks in August.

"Fill it out," she said. "You been convicted of a felony, we deny your application; you skip any spaces, we deny your application; you give us a wrong phone number, we deny your application; we can't reach your references on the third try, we deny your application. You understand?"

I nodded. I asked to borrow a pen.

I got home around ten that night. There were burger bags on the kitchen counter. I checked. They were all empty. My stomach growled. I heard the TV on upstairs. "Honey," I called, "I'm home."

There was some sort of commotion. I was almost ready to check it out but I didn't have my gun yet, so I thought I'd wait.

The guy from next door, Bob, came down the steps. He looked a little flushed. "Just fixed your toilet, Larry. The McMillen bulb come loose from the Dasher flap. Saved you about sixty bucks." He sniffed and hiked up his khaki pants. "Hey, good to see you, gotta run."

I tried not to notice that his fly was down.

Mary came down soon after. She was patting her hair into place. "You get that paper done?"

"Uh-huh," I said. "You know, I don't think it's right, me doing Mr. Lesley's son's homework. How's he going to learn anything?"

"You don't need to know about amoebas to run a company, Larry, think about it."

"I saw Bob here," I said.

"Yeah, that toilet was running again. He fixed it."

"Yeah," I said, "the McMillen bulb."

"Uh-huh," she said and opened the refrigerator and pulled out a can of beer. When she pulled back the tab, the crack was almost as loud as what I expected a little automatic pistol to make.

The next day I ate my sandwich in the car. I heard Cher sing "Bang Bang" on the radio and I laughed, then looked around to make sure no one saw me laughing all alone in the Vega. They'd think I was nuts. Then I went into the pawnshop. "Hi, Phil," I said.

"Hi, Larry. Sheriff's office called this morning."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Yeah?"

"I told them I'd known you all my life and you were an upstanding American, Larry. Now, what are we looking at, still got your eye on that thirty-eight?"

"Yeah, I think so."

"Ever think of a three-fifty-seven?" Phil said.

"Something wrong with the thirty-eight?" I was a little concerned. It seemed like such a nice gun.

"Three-fifty-seven's got more stopping power," he said. "And if all you want to do is throw lead down range . . ."

"And home defense," I said.

"Right. You can still shoot thirty-eights for the economy."

That surprised me. Phil explained how they're the same caliber, it's just the load, which I guessed was the amount of gun powder, behind the bullet.

"And I got a Taurus here for the same price as that Smith."

"Oh, I kind of like a Smith and Wesson," I said, a believer in the reliability of brand names.

"Same gun," Phil said. "Taurus bought the machinery from Smith and Wesson, so it's like the same company, you just don't pay for the hype."

"Oh," I said, not wanting to pay for the hype.

So I started saving for a .357. Seemed kind of big to start with, but I'd only planned on using it once and I liked the sound of "stopping power." Because God knows, I wanted it to stop. I mean, it was the whole purpose, wasn't it?

Mr. Lesley found a typo in the amoebae paper.

"Ever heard of a 'gradular mass,' Larry?"

"No, sir, Mr. Lesley, I don't think so."

"Funny," he said. "It was in the paper you wrote. Gradular mass."

"Oh!" I said. "That's supposed to be *granular* mass."

"Then why didn't it say granular mass, Larry?"

"I don't know, Mr. Lesley." I felt under water, unable to breathe.

He made that face again. "I think it was a mistake, Larry. It was a mistake you made. You made this mistake, I think. It was supposed to be granular mass, but it was gradular mass and that was wrong, wasn't it, Larry?"

I nodded.

"And what do we call it when someone is wrong, Larry?"

"A mistake?"

"Exactly. A mistake you made."

I promised to never, ever, use "gradular" when I meant "granular" again. He explained how expensive mistakes could be. Mistakes were expensive, he said. They cost money, he said, those mistakes. Could dock your pay, he said, and drifted away. All I ever heard about was mistakes.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

When I got home, my best friend from college, Tom, was there. He was upstairs. He'd fixed a broken lamp, Mary said. Her blouse was inside out. I didn't know the lamp was broken.

"The cord was frayed," Tom said, "big fire hazard."

Tom drank a beer with us. Mary sat next to Tom and looked at him from beneath her eyelashes and her hand was moving under the table and Tom said, "Larry? You're my best friend. A friend a guy can turn to in a crunch."

I made friendly noises. Mary did, too.

"So, I hope I'm not outa line here but . . ."

"Anything," Mary said.

"I need to borrow a few dollars, you think you could find your way clear to lend me a few dollars, Larry?"

I said sure and reached into my pocket. Tom put his hand on my arm. "I don't think you've got this much money in your pocket, Larry," Tom said, and laughed. "Not unless you're hiding some slush fund from your lovely wife here."

Mary blushed. I'd never seen her blush before. Never.

"I need three thousand dollars, Larry. You think you can let me have three thousand dollars?"

Mary's hand appeared from wherever it had been under the table and touched the back of Tom's hand. It was a light touch and it made him smile. "Sure we can let you have three thousand dollars," she said. "After all, you're Larry's best friend in the whole world."

The next day I went in and asked Phil if he had anything a little cheaper than the .357.

"Hmmmm," Phil said. "Maybe we oughta look at a few of these twenty-twos."

"Are they cheaper?"

"Oh yeah," Phil said. He unlocked the case and pulled out a black pistol with a long, slender barrel. "This Ruger is very nice," Phil said. "For a few bucks' worth of ammo, you can shoot all day long."

I picked it up. It was very light. Phil showed me how to take out the magazine. "Holds ten rounds," he said. I sighted on the stereos again, careful not to make those noises this time. "But what about stopping power?"

"Well, not much, unless you're real close to your target," Phil said. "But the pros like them."

"The pros?"

"Professional hit men, killers, assassins," Phil said. "Twenty-twos are the real deal. Even the spy guys."

"So, you can kill somebody with these?"

"Oh, sure. You put the muzzle right here," Phil touched me right behind the ear. "Bullet goes in, bounces all around inside, screws up a lot of furniture."

"Oh," I said.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"I got a nice Colt Cadet here, two clips, case, manual, everything. I can let you have it for two ten."

"Two hundred?" I said. Phil nodded. "What about this one here?" I held up the Ruger.

"It's used," Phil said. "No case, no manual, no extra clip, as is."

"Uh-huh?"

"One fifty," he said. "And that's a bargain."

I smiled for the first time since I don't know when. I mean, really smiled. "I think that should do just fine," I said.

Phil smiled too. He'd made a sale.

I figured I had a week or so to work out all the details. So I got my cash together. I had one hundred and twenty-seven dollars stashed between the pages of the Microsoft Word manual. I could skim twenty-three dollars off this week's grocery money. Mary would never know. I laughed. Ha ha. Mary wouldn't know a thing until it was way too late.

I transferred a large amount of cash to an existing account in the Caymans and a small amount to an account in Raleigh. I signed Mr. Lesley's name to the deposit slip, plus a few more phony invoices for phony work performed by phony suppliers. I was still stunned by just how much you can get away with if you're not greedy. A hundred and ten here, eighty-nine there. Over a few dozen months with a few dozen clients, it adds up.

I called the sheriff's office every day. Then, on Monday, they said I'd been approved. I went down to the sheriff's office and picked up the paper. I expected them to look at me funny, but they didn't look at me at all.

That night I went to the Microsoft manual to take the money out, the money for the pistol, the money that I'd saved over a very long time of coupons and pocket change. I opened the Word manual and my whole body broke out in goose bumps as I riffled the pages and there, staring up at me, was only the Word according to Gates and not a note from the Treasury Department.

"How dare you hide money from me, you little worm."

I heard her voice behind me and felt something ice-cold touch me right behind the ear. I almost wet myself.

But it was only her finger. Her finger, cold as her eyes as she cornered me in my little office. Then her finger joined the others in a fist and she socked me in the eye. The flash of pain blinded me and I fell into the little bookcase, pulling it over on top of me, all my computer manuals falling out and spreading over the floor. Then she kicked me, called me a name I wouldn't call an incontinent dog, even if I had new carpet, and stormed out of the house. I watched from the upstairs window as she and a neighbor named Steve drove away in her new BMW.

That was it. This was over. Soon, audits would be done, invoices

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

checked, questions asked. I'd pushed it too far in the past month. Someone was bound to notice. I sat on the floor of my office and stared at my hands. With all the guns in America, why was I having so much trouble getting my hands around a simple little used .22?

The next morning Mary came home. She sat across from me as I ate my Special K. "What?" she said. "What else have you lied to me about?"

"Nothing, Mary, I swear."

"Why did you hide money from me?"

I arranged my face to look as pathetic as I could make it, which, I'm told, is pretty pathetic to start with. "It was for our anniversary," I said. "Since you keep all the checks and everything, if I bought you a gift it wouldn't really be a gift from me. I wanted it to be a gift from me," I said, and hung my head over my cereal.

Mary blinked. "Really?"

"Uh-huh."

She came around the table. She took my head in her arms and said, "Oh, Larry, I'm sorry I ruined your surprise. You can be so doggone sweet sometimes." She stood up, opened her purse, and took out her checkbook. She ripped off a check and put it on the table. "Here, now you go buy me something real special and I won't even care how much it costs."

"You mean it?"

"Yes, I mean it. And I want it to be just from you, something that speaks from your heart, Larry."

I slid the check toward me. "Oh, Mary, I know just the thing," I said.

Phil was as excited as I was by the potential firepower of a blank check. I looked at a Glock, a Desert Eagle, even a Sig P210. It's a very nice nine millimeter, Phil told me, with walnut grips, a notched rear sight that's adjustable for windage, two extra magazines, a manual, hard-shell case, and he'd throw in a box of ammunition free, for only twenty-three hundred dollars.

Only twenty-three hundred dollars. He actually said that. Only.

Twenty minutes later I walked out of Phil's with the right tool for the right job.

That night Mary asked, "Did you find something wonderful?"

And I said, oh yes. And she asked if she could see and I said, no, not yet. I wanted it to be a big surprise.

The next morning I told Mr. Lesley how bad I felt about the gradular mass mistake and offered to take his Mercedes in to have it serviced. It was my way of apologizing. He said that would be fine as long as I did it on my lunch hour. I called the dealer and made an appointment. Before I dropped the car off, I stopped in an alleyway behind the Dixie Mart. I opened the trunk. I took the tire iron out and held it by a paper towel. Then I hit myself, hard,

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

on the forehead. The first time just knocked me backwards. I have to admit, the second time was a lot harder to do, but I thought of Mr. Lesley and Mary and my neighbors and why I was in this alley, and I swung again, imagining all their faces in my face. This time the skin split and I bled into the carpeted interior of the Mercedes trunk. It was a lot of blood. More blood than I would ever have guessed. I remembered when I was in college, during the war protests, that my roommate had told me if the cops start swinging, let them hit me in the forehead. The blood looks great on TV, he said. I stayed in my room.

I took one of my soiled dress shirts out of my briefcase and held it against the gash. When I thought the bleeding had stopped I threw my shirt into the trunk and closed the lid. Then I drove, a little woozy, to the Mercedes dealer, where I left the car in his lot, the keys up over the visor, just as I'd told them I would.

I walked eight blocks, through a very bad part of town, to a Piggly Wiggly, and caught a bus home so no cab company would have me on their sheets. Then I called Mister Lesley and said I'd taken ill and wouldn't be in.

"Oh," he said. I could *hear* that face he made, hear it over the phone. "Did you drop my car off?"

"Yes," I said.

"And how do you propose I get home, hmmmm?" he said. He sounded like those guys on talk radio.

"Please, sir, take my Vega. Just for tonight." I hung up and thought, *In fact, you can keep it, you smug bastard.* That done, I took my new pistol out into the backyard. I pulled on a pair of my wife's gloves. She has big hands, like a meat cutter's. Then I fired the pistol into the ground. It made a hard bang, louder than I thought, and the pistol kicked my hand back. It felt great. All that power traveling up my arm. Yes. I would have pulled the trigger again except I didn't want to rouse the neighbors, not that any of them were home. They weren't. I know my neighbors.

I picked up the empty brass cartridge from the grass, carried it inside, wiped it, and dropped it into the pocket of my wife's casual jacket. I knew she would reach in, find it, look at it, irritated and wondering how it had gotten there, and throw it away. Or maybe not. Either way, her fingerprints would be on it. I put the gloves, with their residue of gunpowder, at the back of the high shelf of the hall closet. Behind the tool box, wool hats, and busted Dustbuster.

That night, before Mary got home, I walked the eight miles to the office, let myself in, and wrote a memo to myself in my computer. It was titled "In the Event I Disappear" and it read, "I think Mr. Lesley has been embezzling from the company. I think my wife knows and, in fact, I think they are going to kill me and blame me. I have bought a gun for protection, but who will protect me in my

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

sleep? I'm very scared." I rewrote it a few times, made the last of the money transfers, emptying out the company's account, and made reservations to Brazil in Mr. and Mrs. Lesley's name. Then, as an added surprise, I left the box of nine-millimeter bullets in Mr. Lesley's credenza. He never looked in there. But the police would.

Now, there was just one last loose end. I made a phone call.

I walked downtown to the bus station, past the empty stores and the nightclubs with names like Mr. Dee's Lion's Den. It was dark and the music that came from the clubs pulsed against the plywood windows. A woman in a very short skirt asked me if I wanted to party. She looked so tired I wondered how she remained vertical and I told her no, I didn't want to party.

When I got to the bus station, I didn't go in. I went around to the back, past the long row of rumbling buses going places I didn't want to go. I went deep into the parking lot, past the last streetlight, and waited by a tall tree. The ground was littered with broken glass and rain-wearied paper and other things I couldn't believe people used in public but there they were. It was very dark under the tree and I waited with my little bag. Inside the bag was a ticket, a passport, and a driver's license made out to Tony Stone of the U.S. Virgin Islands, and the number to that Cayman island account.

I also had the pistol in my coat pocket. It was reassuring and I thumbed the safety on and off in a comforting rhythm. Snick snick, it said. Snick snick.

I thought about Mary and Mr. Lesley and the truckload of embarrassing questions they would face. Maybe, if the prosecutor was up for reelection, they'd actually do some hard time. But probably not. And that was okay.

A shadow near the far row of cars moved toward me. I couldn't see if it was him, but I gripped the automatic tighter, ready if it was him, ready for a stranger if they meant me harm. No one was going to stop me now, not when I was this close to a new life. The shadow moved closer. I started to sweat.

In the halo of the last light, I saw it was him. He had come. The last loose end. "Phil," I said, "over here."

"Man, Larry, you want to try that new gun on a moving target, you picked the right neighborhood. Jesus. This place is fulla crackheads."

"Phil," I said, and stepped out of the darkness. I raised the gun. "I've got something for you." Phil stopped, his face in shock, his mouth open. He started to step back. I twirled the gun on my finger, the way I'd seen in Westerns, and then I handed the pistol to Phil, grip first. He took it, and then looked at it in his hand.

"The Sig P210," he said, with just the right amount of reverence for a fine firearm. "This is mine?"

"Yours," I said. "For being such a great guy and helping me out."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Come on, Larry, nobody gives away a two-thousand-dollar gun. What'd you do, kill someone?"

"I promise," I said, "I haven't shot anyone with that gun. But where I'm going I can't take it with me. So, do you want it?"

Phil's face brightened, his eyes still on the pistol in his hand. "Yeah," he said. "Who wouldn't?"

"Then it makes me happy to give it to you," I said.

Phil put the gun into his pocket and shook my hand. "Thank you, Larry. I'll never forget this."

No, I thought, you won't. Especially after you see the news and start putting it all together. It'll take awhile, but they'll figure it out. I know that. But there's something else you won't do, Phil. You won't turn that gun over to the police. I know that, too. I knew it the first time you took it out of the case. The way you handled it like it was one of those Fabergé eggs.

Hours later, I sat in the middle seat of an airplane going to a hub where Larry would disappear, and Tony would fly on to a new life.

The man next to me was Chuck, a paper salesman. He liked gin and tonics. He lined the little bottles up, dead soldiers, on the pull-down table. "You know," he said, fingering one of the bottles, "I've lived in the same house, on the same street, in the same town for seven years." He tried to focus on me and I could see he'd fueled up before the flight. He closed one eye and I apparently came into view. "And you know what?"

"No," I said, "what?"

"I don't know the man who cuts my grass. Ain't that a shame?"

I sipped the last bad cup of coffee I would ever drink. "Really?"

He nodded.

"Now, that's a pity," I said. "You'd be surprised how useful neighbors can be. Why, a neighbor of mine fixed my toilet, just the other day."

"No," he said.

"Yes," I said, "the McMillen bulb."

He considered it for a moment. "Now that's a neighbor," he concluded. "Heck, my neighbor wouldn't even know a McMillen bulb if it bit him."

"See? So when people say that we don't know our neighbors, that we don't have any understanding of our fellow creatures' needs, you know what I say to that?"

"No," Chuck said, wavering in both concentration and equilibrium. "What do you say to that?"

"I say bunk."

"Bunk, huh?"

"Bunk," I said. Then I sat back and signaled for the flight attendant to bring another gin and tonic for my new friend. I knew, deep down, it was just what he needed. ●

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Art by Mark Evan Walker

The Sweet Singer of 33-A

by Cynthia Lawrence

I'm staying at the Straight Flush Motel for now, and it smells a lot better than the Reno jail. I was only in the lockup overnight, and then the accessory-to-murder charges were dismissed. It was a long night, though, with too many drunks, druggies, and suicidal gamblers around for me to sleep much. So I had plenty of time to think about women and singing.

I remembered Odysseus, how he tied himself to his ship's mast so he wouldn't be lured to his death by the songs of the Sirens.

And, closer to home, I gave a lot of thought to the Orthodox Jews. They believe that a singing woman is a temptation, one that diverts a man from the path of righteous behavior.

Now, I'm not sure that this applies to listening to CDs or going to a Madonna concert. Maybe it's one-on-one singing that's tricky. I'll have to ask my rabbi.

©1999 by Cynthia Lawrence

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Since I'm not Orthodox, and I haven't been to services much since my Rose passed away, I didn't give the old rules any thought. And, after all, what happened during the bus trip could have been just a strange coincidence. I'd hate to think that I got God mad at me. Probably not; at least I haven't been struck dead yet.

Anyway, it was very thoughtful of my daughter and son-in-law to give me the bus tour to Reno and Tahoe as my birthday surprise.

As Muriel said when she handed me the voucher, "Daddy, you've been alone too much since Momma died. You don't go anywhere unless we invite you to visit with us and see how your grandson has grown. A sightseeing tour will do you good. You'll enjoy some spectacular scenery, meet new people. Maybe there'll even be a nice widow on the trip."

My daughter told me, tears in her eyes (and I cried a little, too), "It's time after two years, Daddy, to stop mourning."

I wasn't eager. There are so many nice widows in my Senior Fitness class, I could accept an invitation to a home-cooked meal seven nights a week, if I wanted. Maybe it would be better than Healthy Choice frozen dinners, but I wasn't ready.

As it turned out, I was the only single man on the five-days, four-nights trip. There was a group of ladies, candy stripers from some hospital auxiliary, traveling together. They perked up when I got on the bus, but a shy old fellow like me doesn't do well in a crowd of women.

I picked out a seat in the next-to-the-last row in back, where I wouldn't have to be sociable up through Central California into San Francisco and then Reno and Tahoe.

The couple that turned out to be Mr. and Mrs. Pettibone were directly across the aisle from me. He took the seat in the very last row; she sat alone next row forward, in window seat 33-A.

He was middle-aged, paunchy, neatly dressed in a blue sports shirt and Dockers. A ruddy face, not helped by scars left from a bad case of adolescent acne. Sandy hair fading to grey, and he made the mistake of combing wispy strands across his bald spot. He seemed edgy, like a man who'd been bound and gagged and tossed on this bus to have fun, and didn't expect to survive.

"I've been an eager reader of *EQMM* since the age of twelve," writes author Cynthia Lawrence, "and much of what I know about writing mysteries I learned in its pages." Ms. Lawrence hails from Studio City, California. She is the author of the 1993 mystery novel *Take-Out City* and of an earlier mystery short story for *Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine.*

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

With a nod at me, he pulled out a paperback, Stephen King it was, and buried his nose in the book. It turned out he would read a new book each day, hardly ever talking to his wife, and she ignoring him.

She was a pretty thing, nicely curled blond hair, rosy lips, just a little plump, comfortable-like, always wearing soft print dresses or pastel pants suits. Maybe in her early fifties.

What was special about her was that she sang, in a low, sweet voice. Softly, not to bother anyone. When she didn't seem to remember all the words, she hummed.

Like, when the bus pulled away from our meeting place at the travel agency, she started off the trip nice and lively with "California, Here I Come . . . *ta ta tum ta ta TUM!*"

We all quieted down once the bus was moving. Early morning, there was nothing to look at on the 101 Freeway but traffic. It was only after the driver left the freeway to take us to a rest stop that Mrs. Pettibone sang again. Leo, our tour guide, a large and kindly man, had announced, "We'll stop for twenty minutes for a potty break, and then we'll meet in front of our bus." What a remarkable woman! In those few words, Mrs. Pettibone found a lovely old song.

"Smile the while," she sang, low enough that I barely heard her. But I knew the song, so I mouthed the words with her.

"You kissed me sad adieu," we sang. "When the clouds roll by I'll come to you."

"When the *ta ta ta ta TUM* . . ." she hummed. On the last line, so sad but hopeful, I whispered the harmony.

"Till we meet a-gaayne."

I glanced at Mr. Pettibone. His head was bent so low over his paperback, his thick nose almost touched the pages. Were King's words so fascinating, or was he simply trying to ignore this precious songbird?

The tour made another stop in Gilmore, garlic capital of California. There was a food stand that sold spicy garlic sausages. Near it were picnic tables where we could have cold drinks and sausage rolls, turn our faces up to the golden afternoon sunshine, and sniff the garlic-laden fields that stretched for miles around us.

Mr. Pettibone sat alone at one end of a picnic table, devouring a couple of sausages and more chapters of his novel. Mrs. Pettibone joined some of the ladies and merrily sang to them all the verses to "Frankfurter Sandwiches," a bouncy but little-known ditty from the 1930s. Everyone laughed and applauded.

Enchanting woman! A breeze ruffled a stray blond curl on her forehead. I thought of all the musical notes that must fill that fair head. For two years I had shuffled around my silent house, hardly even bothering with the TV except when I forced myself to turn on the nightly news with Dan Rather or Tom Brokaw or Peter Jen-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

nings, but their voices were deep and significant, very little laughter and no song.

"Mr. Pettibone is such a great reader," said one of the women at our table with a hint of disapproval.

"Oh, he's just recently retired," said his wife with a smile and a shrug. "Bernard always worked such long hours, he's catching up on all the books he never had time to read before."

Bernard has a lousy attitude, I told myself. And her always so cheerful. I suppose, like in so many longstanding marriages, they hardly listen to each other anymore.

Well, the Pettibones weren't my problem.

The bus arrived in San Francisco in the early evening. I remember that she sang "It Happened in Monterey" and, as we passed near a stand of cypress, "Trees."

Dressing to meet the group for dinner, I found myself humming, "And the gold of her hair and the blue of her eyes is *ta tum* the western skies . . ." crooning into the bathroom mirror, "the moonlight beams on the girl of my dreams . . . *tum tum tum tum tum TA TA TUM!*"

A last look in the mirror before leaving my hotel room. Paul Newman, don't worry. I'm just a San Francisco tourist in a tan windbreaker and khakis. Nobody to stand out in a crowd. Still plenty of hair, though, and, if I combed carefully, more brown than grey. Stomach flat and a few good muscles, thanks to three mornings a week of fitness classes.

I'd put on a fresh white shirt. A short debate with myself, and I added a tan and maroon striped tie, just for something lively. After all, we were going out on the town.

I was disappointed that the Pettibones didn't join us for dinner in Chinatown. Leo told us they'd begged off; those garlic sausages in Gilroy didn't agree with Mr. Pettibone.

What a shame, I thought. Antacids for dinner on their first night in San Francisco. But Mr. Pettibone wasn't, to put it mildly, a sociable man. At least he could have sent his wife off to dinner with the group.

I'd begun to make friends with the others, but even as I made small talk, poured tea, and passed the egg rolls, a picture passed before my eyes of *her* as a caged bird. None of my business, I told myself, as Ms. Morris of the hospital auxiliary and the nervous giggle inquired whether I lived alone.

"I'd love to live in loveland with a boy like you . . ." It was a tuneful start to our San Francisco tour the next morning.

Mr. Pettibone, restored to health, had opened a new paperback, a Tom Clancy. International intrigue and power plays. I much

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

preferred to sit back and listen to my chanteuse across the aisle.

Not that Clarisse did too much singing that day. Yes, that was her name. Mr. Pettibone growled, "C'mon, Clarisse, you're holding everyone up," when she chatted with the other ladies as we boarded the bus.

I followed as we made our way to our seats at the rear.

She turned back and smiled at me. Her eyes were as bright blue and sparkling as the windswept bay that morning.

"Did I hold you up?" she asked. "I'm truly sorry."

"No problem," I assured her. "We're all in the same boat, er, bus."

A tinkly laugh at my feeble joke, and she said, "Here we are, practically seatmates, and I don't even know your name." She held out a small white hand, the nails painted a rosy color.

"I'm Clarisse."

We shook hands; you'd think I'd never touched a woman before.

I felt a tingle; maybe it was a warning, I don't know.

"Irvin, here. My friends call me Irv."

It was mortifying, but my voice cracked, like a kid stumbling through puberty. Her eyes were so blue, and I thought I caught a look of surprise as I mumbled something about the early morning fog. As if I needed an explanation.

But all she said was, "So nice to meet you, Irv," and settled herself demurely in her window seat. Not a glance at Mr. P., who was already deep into his Tom Clancy.

Leo, together with Dan, our amiable young driver, was an expert guide to San Francisco. In between Leo's patter of short stories and tall tales, Clarisse softly sang a few choruses of "Chinatown, My Chinatown," as Dan coaxed the tour bus through narrow streets and up the hills, teetered on top to give us a view of the Bay and Alcatraz, then plunged down narrow windy streets to land at Fisherman's Wharf. It was time for lunch and the remainder of the day on our own.

I turned down offers for company and wandered off by myself. Clarisse had sung "Chinatown" as a wistful ballad. Now, strolling in the sunshine, through the waves of tourists moving through the Wharf, I felt a yearning that was so long forgotten, I couldn't even give a name to it. I just knew that I felt alive again and, peculiarly, sad and happy at the same time. At my age.

Just because a pretty woman sang the songs of yesteryear, calling up so many sweet and innocent memories. A married woman with a surly husband. I didn't need trouble. What I needed was a brisk, no-nonsense walk to clear my head.

First, a stop at a souvenir shop to buy T-shirts with pictures of the Bay Bridge for Muriel, David, and baby Danny. Prophetically, for myself, a grey and black striped shirt that said, in bright red letters, ALCATRAZ. At the time I thought it was funny.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Well, I climbed hills until my calf muscles screamed and finally I hopped a cable car back to the hotel. Dinner was quiet and solitary, a sandwich and a local brew in a pub down the street.

Back in the room, even with the TV on, my head was filled with songs. I've never been a fellow with much imagination, but I swear I could hear Clarisse's singing, like lullabies in my skull. Maybe that's why I slept so well that night.

I did have one dream that startled me awake the next morning. In it, my rabbi was telling me to change seats, move up front near the driver. What was the significance? Considering our last night in Tahoe, it could take a convention of rabbis to figure it out.

We'd been a happy group leaving San Francisco, driving north on a highway that wound through pine-scented woods, flashes of sunlight dazzling our eyes between the trees, climbing to the blue tranquility of Lake Tahoe. Clarisse sang and hummed "Painting the Clouds with Sunshine." Bernard Pettibone ignored the scenery, settling in with a scowl on his face and *The Silence of the Lambs*. An oldie but goodie if you like vicious killers.

Our hotel was on the Nevada side, a manageable walk or a short shuttle ride to the downtown casinos in Reno.

Since this was a resort area, there was no planned itinerary for our two-day stay. I swam in the hotel pool, sunned myself like a pale lizard, met some of my new friends for a steak-and-lobster dinner, won thirty dollars at blackjack, and quit while I was ahead.

Never was a gambler.

Day two was almost a repeat of the first day. I'd seen little of the Pettibones; they'd rented a convertible, my friends said, for a drive around the lake. As if they were going off, just the two of them, like a second honeymoon.

Suddenly, the old songs and Clarisse's voice cleared out of my head and it was a relief. Listen, old fellow, I told myself, settle yourself into your golden years. If you want companionship, get yourself a Labrador retriever.

That morning the Pettibones were in the hotel coffee shop. I passed by, said good morning, and was greeted with a chirpy hello from Clarisse. To my surprise, Bernard stood and beamed at me. His face had a new tan from driving with the top down.

"Good to see you," said Bernard heartily. "Having fun?"

A happy Bernard was unsettling. Out of the corner of my eye I glanced at Clarisse, but she was absorbed, head down, in buttering her whole-wheat toast.

"It's a nice trip," I agreed, and added, "Have a good day," waving my morning newspaper to confirm that I planned to eat alone. Not that he'd invite me to join them. What with the two of them sitting there like lovebirds.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

❖ ❖ ❖

There was a full yellow moon that night and endless clusters of stars. They shone on the tall trees, lighting my way back from the casinos. After a listless couple of hours winning and losing and losing again at the blackjack tables, I'd decided to return to my room, pack for our early morning departure, and read until the piney breeze lulled me to sleep.

But first I stopped at the deserted pool area and sat at one of the tables, enjoying a last look at the glittering heavens, a final taste of pure air before the Los Angeles smog. I was wearing a navy pullover and denims, almost blending into the night, but she saw or heard me. She was half hidden in a lounge chair, back to me, and I started at the words that came out of the dark.

"It's my seatmate. Hi, Irv."

"Clarisse! What are you doing out here?"

"Just like you, enjoying the night." Was she enjoying it? Her voice was flat, unemotional. Unlike her.

Had they had a quarrel? "Where's Bernard? You know, it's not too safe to be here alone. With all the money that floats around the casinos, Reno has its share of robberies."

"I know. I expect Bernard will be looking for me soon." There was a silence between us. Then, in a low voice, husky with night air, she began to sing.

I might have slipped into a trance, the way the songs recur even now in my brain. Half-remembered old ballads, sweet serenades of love, songs of deathless devotion and eternal hope. "Always." "Me and My Shadow." Even "White Cliffs of Dover."

At some point I joined in, still damnably shy but drawn to her. She was facing the dark bulk of the hotel. The space between us was not ready to be closed. Without knowing why, I was certain there was more to come. Our voices blended and harmonized, two spirits met and mingling in song. I'd never felt so bound, or so free.

"You should leave now," said Clarisse, pausing for a breath. "While you can, dear Irv."

I stopped in mid-chorus of "There's a Long, Long Trail A-winding" and protested.

"Do you think I'm afraid of Bernard?" I said, my senses too excited to fear a mere husband.

"No, but you should be afraid of me," she said.

I sang away her fears. *"Ta tum ta tum,* you'll be riding down that long, long trail with me."

How much time had passed? The night air had become chilly.

"Are you getting cold, Clarisse?" I asked reluctantly, not wanting this encounter to end.

Her answer was mystifying. "No," she said, then asked, "Do you have hobbies, Irv?"

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Not really," I said. "Does it matter?"

"Bernard retired with no hobbies. It's created problems."

"I can understand that. But my Rose died just a few weeks after I retired, so we never had to adjust."

"Ah, yes," said Clarisse, sounding amused. "Death. The woman's traditional way out."

Should my feelings be hurt? Defensively I said, "I never wanted her to die."

"Well, that's the difference."

I saw Clarisse tense and lean forward. Quickly, she stood, looking across the pool, the grassy lawn, and the walkway, to the back entrance of the hotel. I remember that she wore a gauzy white dress, its skirt floating around her.

My eyes caught a movement at the hotel entrance. A man in dark clothes opening the glass door. Even at this distance, I could tell it was Bernard Pettibone. As I watched, he raised an arm and I could see the gleam of a revolver. He took his time, sighting carefully at Clarisse, an easy target in her white dress.

"Watch out," I cried, "he's got a gun!"

"So do I." With one swift, seamless action, Clarisse lifted a small, pearl-handled gun and aimed it at her husband.

Now this is what still keeps me awake nights: Could I have pulled her down, out of Bernard's sight, and saved her? Or should I have knocked the gun out of Clarisse's hand and saved *him?*

I did neither. I stood there, arms raised to take action, and did nothing. As if I were playing a deadly game of statues. And what I didn't do changed all our lives.

She sighted and fired. I couldn't see where she'd hit him, but it was deadly accurate shooting. Bernard dropped and lay motionless.

I stared at the moonlit scene. Everything was in painfully sharp outline: the gun she now held at her side, the lounge chairs and tables, the body across the lawn.

"He wanted to kill you," I cried.

"Yes, you saw."

Her voice was calm, with none of the emotion she put into her singing. "I'm sorry you're involved, but now you're my witness. I killed him in self-defense."

"Self-defense," I repeated numbly. "Yes, he pointed the gun right at you. But you knew. You were waiting with your own gun." I shook my head. "I don't understand."

"It was the thirty-eight Special he kept in his office when he worked late. I found it in his suitcase. He'd forgotten to pack his ulcer medicine. I found the gun when I opened the suitcase.

"I think he planned to fake a holdup, so I gave him the opportunity—on *my* terms. If he didn't shoot at me, well, no harm done. I'd just see a divorce lawyer and end the marriage legally."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

She sighed. "I don't know which way is messier."

I looked across at Bernard's still form. There was no doubt in my mind that he was dead.

"To kill someone," I protested (perhaps protesting too much), "that's terrible. Why wouldn't he accept a divorce?"

"Bernard has always refused to compromise. Do you think he'd give me half of what we owned? California is a community-property state."

"But, a good lawyer—a restraining order."

"After he retired, I tried to make it work," said Clarisse, more to herself than to me.

"It was the singing that led to this. Bernard always worked long hours. He is—was—an accountant. Many times, he didn't come home till after midnight. That's why I bought my own gun; I was usually alone in the house, you see. I took up target practice; it was one of *my* hobbies.

"I also played the piano for myself, and sang. Oh, how I sang! From the time Bernard left in the morning until he came home. I didn't mind the silence then, if it was just overnight."

"And then he retired," I filled in.

She turned to me and smiled sadly. "You're beginning to understand. Bernard *hated* what he called noise, that is, my music. And since he hardly ever left the house once he retired, I felt terribly stifled."

"It must have been difficult for you."

This lovely woman, her skin and hair angelically pale in the moonlight, cried out, "You can't imagine my suffering! I tiptoed around while Bernard read his violent novels. All those high notes and harmonies, scales and trills, all the shades and colors of human experience distilled into pulsating rhythms, concentrated in clever rhymes—all the lyrics rising from my throat and beating against my silent lips."

Clarisse's face was rapt, her blue eyes shone. I was stunned by love and dismay.

"You lay in wait for him," I said. "It wasn't self-defense. It was revenge."

"This vacation," she said, "was a last attempt to get along."

"A second honeymoon," I stated.

"Something like that. We were all right on the bus, as long as we ignored each other. Then, yesterday, Bernard rented the Buick convertible and we drove around the lake and stopped for a picnic lunch. We brought along books and sat under a tree, close together, reading. Last night," her eyes lowered, "for the first time in a long time, we made love."

Hastily, not wanting more details, I asked, "And then?"

"This morning I was so happy, I forgot. In the shower, I began to

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

sing. Bernard didn't say a word about it. But when he was so nice to you in the coffee shop, I knew the time had come. Bernard was setting up an alibi as the happy husband.

"He is—was—never happy before breakfast. We hardly spoke the rest of the day. In the evening, we walked over to one of the casinos, and he gave me money to play. Too much money. And I did win a few jackpots on the slots. He made a point of turning to people nearby, saying how lucky I was. Then he disappeared and I walked back alone, my winnings and the gun in my purse.

"I figured he'd be waiting for me somewhere near the hotel. But when I sat down by the pool, he had to come out and find me."

"What will you do now?" I asked, filled with sudden dread.

"Turn myself in," she said wearily. "You know, I've changed my mind. You're such a darling. If you leave this minute, you won't have to be involved."

"I can't do that," I protested. "I'm your witness. Self-defense."

Clarisse was looking again at the hotel entrance.

"Too late, anyway," she said.

A man and a woman had emerged, almost stumbling across Bernard's body. I heard a scream, the man bent over the fallen figure, then he began to shout.

Things happened fast after that. The police came and took Clarisse and me off to jail. I spent the night in the lockup and used my phone call to talk to my daughter and son-in-law.

Since the bus tour had left, David insisted on flying up to escort me home. As if I was so old or disturbed I needed to be led to the plane.

After checking into the Straight Flush Motel next morning, I took a shower, changed my clothes, and went to see Clarisse. She was waiting in one of the interview rooms, a policewoman for company. When I entered, Clarisse was humming, "I'm only a bird in a gilded cage, *ta ta TUM,* what a sight to see."

She smiled at me with the warmth and sweetness I knew was in her soul. I asked about her attorney. She said he was flying up tomorrow. After the inquest, no doubt charges would be dismissed. As an impartial witness, my statement would carry weight.

I thought maybe I should be a smart man and never look her up, once she was back in L.A. I'd always been proud of being a highly moral man. But pride goes before a tumble into the abyss. Now I realize that my hesitation brought me to a deep dark place inside me that I never knew existed.

It could be dangerous to hear this woman sing. But my house was so silent, so silent.

I took her hand in both of mine. She stood, and her clear blue eyes shone with promise.

"Till we meet again," I said. ●

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Gun Control

by William Bankier

"You write about the fragility of self-esteem and acts of great desperation," an interviewer for *EQMM* said to William Bankier in the '80s. The observation remains true today. William Bankier has been a resident of L.A. for many years, and in his stories we see how the urban environment reacts with character to create a precarious balance. †

Keegan walked across Santa Monica Boulevard and went inside the Cosmo Variety Store to buy a lottery ticket. Usually, he bought his tickets at the 7-11 near his apartment. This change in procedure would have to be explained in his next letter to Bella.

"Dear Bella," he would write, seated at the roll-top desk under the window in his bedroom. "Today I took a chance on a new shop. Remember the one we used to walk past on our way to Plummer Park? Don't worry, I'm being careful. You told me often enough, how could I forget?"

Now he said, "One Quick-Pick for tonight, please," putting a dollar on the counter. The person who took his money and punched up the ticket was a middle-aged Asian woman wearing a black kimono with big white flowers on it.

Tucking the ticket into his wallet, Keegan wandered among the shelves, away from the open doorway. He was taking a look-see. There was a refrigerator cabinet full of beer and sodas. There were racks of chips, pretzels, peanuts, candy. He saw just about everything a retired real-estate man could need. He might start coming here for supplies.

Somebody walked in and stood by the counter. Keegan heard a voice, high-pitched, sounded like a kid. "Gimme the money. I'll shoot. Gimme the money!"

Keegan wondered what to do. He stood still. There was nearly a hundred dollars in his wallet. If the robber noticed him, should he give it up?

"Don't shoot me. I have children."

The anguish in the woman's voice got to Keegan. She was really scared. By tipping his head, he could see the space in front of the

©1999 by William Bankier

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

counter. It was, indeed, just a kid. His blond hair was overdue for cutting. A purple tank top exposed skinny arms and shoulders. Keegan could not take this boy seriously. Maybe the gun was loaded, maybe not. Certainly his attention was focused across the counter.

"Open the register. Gimme the money."

Keegan shifted his feet quietly. He moved down the aisle and emerged behind the peewee gunman. The shopkeeper did not react to his approach. Her eyes remained fastened on the bandit.

Stepping forward, Keegan was able to bring his left forearm under the boy's chin in a choke-hold while grasping the gun hand and forcing the weapon's aim up to the ceiling. It was ludicrously easy. The kid responded with very little strength.

"Let go the gun!" His right hand shared a grip on the weapon. The boy's head smelled of dandruff. His body felt flimsy against Keegan, all bones and cartilage. "Don't make me hurt you. Give it up!"

It was over. The failed robber released the gun to Keegan. It was plastic, a realistic toy. He showed the woman behind the counter, to quiet her fear. "He wasn't going to hurt anybody with this."

"He was going to take my money." She went for the telephone. "Hold him. I'll call the police."

Keegan was gripping the back of the tank top now like a halter on a baby. The boy had a small pink face with green eyes showing plenty of white. "Is that necessary? I don't think he'll do this again."

"You bet he won't." She began dialing.

Keegan walked out of the store with the boy still in his grasp. He put the toy gun in his pocket. People were looking at them so he abandoned his grip on the tank top and took hold of an upper arm.

"Where are you taking me?"

"I don't know."

"The police?"

"I doubt it."

"Then let me go."

"Not yet."

Keegan began wondering what he was doing. He remembered reading somewhere that if you save a life, you are forever responsible for that person. He had saved this boy from committing a crime, and then from being turned over to the cops. So he might as well be responsible for the next hour or so.

"I was going to eat," he said. "Are you hungry?"

"That's why I wanted the money."

"I'll buy you lunch."

Man and boy went inside Astroburger. They slid into a booth against the window and ordered burgers and shakes and pie. The kid ate with a strange concentration. When he bit down on the burger he was focused on bun and meat. But as he chewed, his eyes went up to the ceiling and he sighed as if he was

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

remembering problems that would not go away.

"What's your name?" Keegan asked.

"Bernie," the kid said. "What's yours?"

"Keegan. Do you live around here?"

"No. I live down east. With my brother." Telling his story began to interest the boy. "I get on a bus in the morning and get off at a different stop each time. I never hit the same neighborhood twice. You'll never see me again. Some of the kids carry a real gun. A few of them use it. You see them on the news. I'll never do that."

"You should be in school."

"I quit school. You spend the whole day in class and then they give you all this work they expect you to do at home. Grownups don't have that. You close the store, your time's your own. My brother Burke, he agrees with me. Burke says when I get older I can come and work with him. He strips cars."

"What do your parents think about this?"

"My dad burned up in his bed. My mom took off. She's in Phoenix, I think. She doesn't care about me."

After eating, they found a bench under a tree in Plummer Park. "I'm worried about you," Keegan said. "You may not want to hear it."

"Why should you worry about Bernie?" The kid still had his toothpick from the restaurant. He held it now between his lips at a cocky angle.

There was no easy answer. "I won't lie. I'm alone since my wife died last year. I have worries that don't concern you."

"Like what?"

"Old-people worries. Getting sick and ending up in a nursing home. Dying."

"I think about dying all the time."

"Forget that. At your age."

"You saw those two girls on the news? They tied their wrists together and stepped off the cliff in Palos Verdes? They have no worries now."

"They've missed everything. All the fun and excitement of life."

"Who says?"

"I don't want to argue, Bernie. I'm trying to level with you." Keegan's own words surprised him. "I'm getting involved with you to take my mind off myself. For today, anyway."

"Like a hobby."

"I suppose."

"Good." The boy took the toothpick out of his mouth and studied the wet end. "But I don't want anybody weeping over me like I'm some kind of sad case."

Keegan had to smile. "I don't see you as any sort of sad case."

"Can I have my gun back?"

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"I forgot all about it." Keegan took the plastic pistol from his pocket, gripped it in both hands, and snapped it in half. He tossed the fragments into a trashbin at the end of the bench.

"What do I do now? Pick pockets?"

"You could get a job."

"That's the last thing I'm going to do."

"We've done enough sitting. Let's move on."

They began walking, heading for his apartment. Since nobody was saying anything, Keegan resumed planning his letter to Bella. "I've met a boy named Bernie. He was about to commit a robbery. I managed to head it off. He was hungry, so I fed him. I seem to be taking him under my wing. He's mentioned a brother who sounds like a bad actor. I know, I know, watch out for trouble. The good news is, I don't hurt anymore. Remember when I used to say I thought I could not survive? Now I know I will, as long as I can have these chats with you."

Like a cat, Bernie had to tour every room of Keegan's apartment, looking into each nook and cranny. "This is a cool place," he said when he followed his benefactor into the kitchen and slung himself onto one of the chairs by the pine table. "You must own a bank or something."

"No. I was in real estate before I retired. I made a little money. I also lost a lot of it. I gambled. I drove to Gardena and played poker in the card clubs. My wife tried to stop me, but I was hooked. Strange; after she died, I quit."

"So now you're broke."

"Far from it. I made some investments that keep me going." Keegan had been undecided. Now he made up his mind. "The small bedroom can be yours. My wife used to sleep in there when my snoring woke her up."

"What a kind lady. I would have kicked you in the back." Bernie sat forward with his elbows on his knees. "You mean I can stay here?"

"That's right."

"Maybe I'll stay for a while."

"Want milk and cookies?"

"No, thanks. That was more than I eat in a week." He scratched his scalp vigorously with all ten fingers. "Can I take a bath?"

"Feel free. Use the towels on the rack beside the tub."

Leaving the kitchen, the boy stopped and turned. "I can't stay very long. My brother needs me."

"You're not in jail. Leave when you like."

With water running in the tub, Keegan called through the bathroom door, "I have to get a few things. Back soon." Then he went out of the building and into the underground garage, got into his car, and drove quickly to a mall a few streets away. He was back

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

before Bernie was out of his bath. He went into the small bedroom and laid out the new clothes on the spread. There were three T-shirts, two pairs of shorts, four pairs of socks, and a pair of sandals with adjustable straps. Then he went back and rapped on the bathroom door. "Have you drowned in there?"

The plug was pulled, water began running down the drain. "It's so nice to have lots of hot water."

"Glad you enjoyed it." Keegan went into the living room and turned on the television. Some commentators were trying to understand Bosnia. Bernie's voice sounded from the bedroom.

"What's with the clothes?"

"You can't come out of a bath and put on that sweaty old stuff."

Ten minutes later, the boy walked into the living room and stood hesitantly, as if he might have to run. The blond hair was spikey when wet.

"You look great. I lucked out on the sizes."

Now a sheepish expression of pleasure took over Bernie's face. "I owe you for these," he said.

In the morning, Keegan got up at six and made scrambled eggs and toast. It was what he used to do for Bella. The boy was a slugabed, he needed covers pulled off and a pillow dragged from his embrace.

"What time is it?"

"Best time of the day. Let's go. Breakfast is on the table." He gave Bernie milk to drink while Keegan himself slurped his decaf.

"Why milk?"

"You need to grow your bones. You're small."

"Small is good. People take pity on me. They don't hold me for the cops. They make me breakfast."

"You deserve breakfast."

"We'll see."

Midmorning, Keegan loaded Bernie into the car and drove to Griffith Park, following the winding road up to the observatory. The boy had never been there.

"Didn't your school bring you?"

"I was away that day."

Keegan conducted a mini-tour. They looked at the giant pendulum. They triggered metal balls that raced into an orbit which decayed gradually until each ball disappeared down a dark hole. Bernie pushed a button that caused a model of the famous telescope to swing into operation.

Afterwards, they went outside and stood behind a parapet with the immeasurable city spread out before them under a saffron haze. For a while, they tried to identify landmarks.

Finally, Keegan said, "We have to get you back in school."

"Forget it."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Didn't you like where you've just been?"

"School isn't like that."

"School is like everything. It's what you do with it."

"Besides, Burke needs me to work on the cars. I won't be hanging with you forever."

For a few more days, the old man and the boy went places together. They attended an afternoon game at Dodger Stadium. They saw a very fine movie in which a man was cloned three times so that copies of himself could attend to various aspects of his life.

On a Tuesday morning, Bernie said, "I need some time to myself."

"Understood."

"I'll see you at supper."

"Stay out of trouble."

"I don't need you to tell me that."

Keegan took out his wallet. "You'll need walking-around money."

The boy came back around three in the afternoon while Keegan was watching one of his world-affairs programs on PBS. He moved through quickly to his room, carrying a store bag tucked up under his arm. A few minutes later, he came into the living room and sat on the floor between Keegan and the TV set.

"Had a good day out there?"

"Fine. What's going on in the world? Is it safe yet?"

Keegan was curious to know what the boy had bought, but he had no intention of checking out the spare bedroom. He could not avoid the plastic bag, however, when he was emptying wastebaskets on the following morning and found it crumpled under some other trash. There was a cash-register receipt inside the bag. The amount was $15.95. The purchase was one Super-Ace Police Pistol. Keegan threw out the trash and wondered what to do. He could not think of a thing.

"Can I use the telephone?" It was the first time Bernie had asked to do this. "I want to check in with my brother."

"Of course."

The boy dialed carefully, his face close to the key-pad. He held the receiver in both hands; it mostly covered the small, pink face. "Burke? It's me . . . I'm fine. Staying with a geezer I met in a shop . . . No. Shut up! Nothing like that. He's my friend. We went to the stadium, saw Karros hit a homerun." Now it was mostly listening. "Yeah. Sure. I know. . . . Yeah. Just a minute." Bernie covered the mouthpiece and turned to Keegan. "Is it okay if I tell him your address?"

"Why not? Your brother should know where you're staying."

Bernie recited the address of the building and the apartment number.

"You seem anxious to work for your brother," Keegan said when the call was over and the boy was staring at the telephone.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"I have to do something."

"I wish you'd stay here. There's a school within walking distance. When term starts, we can register you."

"Don't make me crazy."

"You'd do better at this school. I'll help you. You've got a quiet room. Homework is easy when you can concentrate."

"You're not my parents." Bernie got up and ran out of the room. "Don't push me around!" he yelled, his voice muffled as if his face was buried in a pillow.

Next morning, he came to the breakfast table without being called. His face was scrubbed clean, his eyes were bright. He looked rested. "Where do we go today?" he asked, his mouth full of cold cereal, lip dripping milk.

"I haven't given it any thought." Keegan did so now. "We could go to the beach and throw peanuts to the gulls."

There were big waves at Topanga. The surfers were out in force. When they figured out the wind, Keegan and Bernie were able to fire peanuts high up to where the big white gulls could take them on the fly. Afterwards, they walked along the tideline, heads down, looking for interesting rocks and shells. Bernie picked something up and brought it to Keegan.

"This is an Indian arrowhead," he announced.

The brown flint was shaped to a point. Marks along the edges could have been made by somebody striking it with another stone. "You may be right."

"Wow! I wonder how it got here."

"I wonder, too." They went on walking. Bernie would stare at his find for a few steps and then he would raise his eyes to the horizon. "It's something you can think about," Keegan said.

On the way home, they stopped at an ice-cream parlor. As they feasted on banana splits, Keegan brought up the subject of the toy gun purchase. "Please don't think I'm spying on you. I never would. But when I was emptying trash, I couldn't help noticing the receipt in the bag from the toy shop."

"Here we go."

"You've bought yourself another gun."

"I wanted it."

"I bet it looks real."

"That's the way they make them." Bernie took time getting just the right amount of ice cream and chocolate syrup on his spoon. "I'm not going to rob anybody. I don't have to now."

"I believe you. But can I keep the gun in my room?"

"So I can't sneak out with it and knock over a variety store?"

"I'd feel better."

When they got home, Bernie went directly to his room and

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

returned with the gun. It was still in bubble plastic, mounted on a display card. Keegan unpacked it and held it in his hand. Its light weight gave it away, but it looked realistic. Seen from a distance, especially by a frightened victim, it would look like the real thing.

"It's neat, isn't it?"

"I can see why you like it." Keegan took the toy into his bedroom and buried it in his sock drawer. When he came back, he discovered the boy with his back to the room. He appeared to be looking out the window.

"What's out there?"

"Can't see a thing." Bernie's voice sounded strange. He put both hands over his face and raised his shoulders. He was shaking.

Keegan moved close behind him. The boy was crying. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing." Bernie turned and revealed a tear-stained face. He took out a handkerchief and dried his cheeks and rubbed his eyes. Then he blew his nose. "You really care about me."

"Of course."

"You don't want me to do myself harm."

"You're a good kid. I want you to succeed and have fun."

Bernie lowered his forehead against Keegan's chest. The old man put an arm around the boy's shoulder. Years ago, when he had turned a good deal in real estate, he used to feel this way.

A few days later, Keegan was approaching the building on foot, carrying a bag of groceries, when he noticed a dusty pickup truck looking for a place to park. The right front fender was a different color from the rest of the body. The driver was a red-haired man, cheeks and chin bearded, eyes masked by dark glasses. Keegan went inside as the truck headed for a space at the curb half a block away.

Keegan was putting away groceries with the boy's help. The doorbell rang three times and then, with scarcely five seconds' pause, a fist began banging heavily on the panel.

"That's Burke." Bernie ran to the sofa, flung himself down, grabbed a cushion, and clutched it against his chest. "Now look out."

Keegan went to the door and opened it. The sinister-looking man walked into the apartment without being invited. He kept his dark glasses on. "There he is," he said. "There's my little brother. Come on, Bernie, let's go."

"I'm not going."

"Come on, kid. Things for you to do."

"I want to stay here."

"Don't make me come and get you."

It was happening so fast, Keegan had trouble catching up. "Just a minute," was all he had time to say.

"Keep out of this, Gramps."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"The boy should be allowed to choose."

"Shut up, you old pervert. Keep using my little brother, I may call the cops."

"I told you, Burke. It isn't like that."

"Move it. I got ten cars in the barn. I need you."

"Forget it." The boy turned a frightened face to Keegan. "Don't let him take me."

"Okay, you want it the hard way." Burke crossed the room like an animal, gave Bernie a backhand across the face, then took a fistful of the spikey hair. He began dragging his brother towards the door.

Keegan's mind unfroze at last. It kicked in with what to do. He ran into his bedroom, opened the sock drawer, and pulled out the realistic toy gun. Back in the living room, he aimed the weapon at the intruder, holding it with both hands, bending his knees the way he saw detectives do it on TV.

"Freeze! Let the kid go."

Burke stopped moving, but he maintained his grip on Bernie's hair. "He means it," the kid yelled. "He used to be a cop."

Being cast in the role by this audacious child increased Keegan's confidence. "Let the boy go. Now!"

Burke did as he was told. Bernie scurried away from him and took up a position behind Keegan. "Now get out of here," the retired real-estate man said. "And stay the hell out of West Hollywood. I see you again, I run you in. I know where you live. I know about the chop shop. If you're smart, you'll move where I won't bother looking for you. Try Phoenix."

Keegan could recognize a little of Bernie in Burke's arrogance as he moved to the door. "Keep the kid," he said. "Who gives a damn? He eats more than he's worth."

He was in the doorway, heading outside, when Bernie took a run at him and planted a kick on his right ankle. The big brother made a menacing move but he kept on going. The door was closed. Man and boy held their breath for long enough to let Burke reach the street. Then they began laughing, reasonably at first, but building to a mild hysteria. Bernie rolled on the floor. Keegan fell back on the sofa, the toy gun hanging across his knees.

"Retired cop?" he said when he could breathe. "Retired cop?"

Fighting for control, the boy gasped, "I should have said you gave out parking tickets."

Bernie did well at school. He came back to the apartment every day and completed his homework before supper. His books were always neatly stacked on the desk in his peaceful room. Charts and schedules were pinned to a corkboard on the wall above his bed. One day he told Keegan, "School is easy."

"You're a smart kid. It should be easy."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"It's this apartment. It's my room. It's you."

Later, the boy came out of his bedroom with something enclosed in his hand. He opened his fingers to show Keegan the Indian arrowhead. "This is what I mean," he said. "I want to leave something behind. To show I was here."

One evening, as the sun was going down, Keegan was seated at the roll-top desk in his bedroom. Pen in hand, notepaper angled before him, he was composing a letter to Bella. Bernie came into the room quietly. He stood just behind Keegan for some time without doing or saying anything to announce his presence. But the old man knew he was there. Finally, he put a hand on Keegan's shoulder.

"Another letter to your wife?"

"Yes. It's been awhile." Keegan experienced a strange feeling. It was as if their positions had been reversed. He was the child and Bernie was the adult.

"I don't think you have to write her anymore."

"No?"

"No. You started doing that when you were alone. You're not alone now."

"I see."

Keegan capped his pen. He put it and the notepaper in the drawer. Years later, he would come across the letters and read them. He had been talking to himself.

Bernie stayed with Keegan until he was eighteen. Then he got a part-time job and moved into a small apartment with a young woman who was assistant manager of a bank—the one where he kept his account. His grades were excellent. UCLA approved his application for next term.

The old man resumed his solitary life, enlivened by visits from the young couple. On occasion, he wondered what he might get them for a wedding gift.

He kept the toy gun in his sock drawer. It came in handy one more time. Awakened at two in the morning by sounds from the front room, he slipped out of bed, took the gun from the drawer, crept into the living room, and waited for his eyes to adjust to dim light from the big window. Somebody had removed the screen and was now working at sliding back the glass in its steel frame. Keegan came across the room in a crouch, drew back the curtain, and found himself staring into a pair of wide eyes.

"Don't make me use this," he whispered, holding the gun where it could be seen. The intruder collapsed into shrubbery, broke through, and ran across the lawn.

As for Keegan, he went back to bed and lay for some time, thinking. Guns were a bad thing, he concluded. But the threat of a gun, once in a while, could be useful. ●

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Art by Allen Davis

The Message of the Stars

by Michael Gilbert

In spite of the fact that he was one of the senior partners in that well-known firm of East London Solicitors, Fearne and Bracknell, Bob Bracknell's elder sister, Felicity, still contrived to view him as a younger brother, improving, but not yet to be trusted entirely. When she spoke to him on the telephone that morning it was in her Roedean voice.

"Louella Firebrace is an old friend of mine. A very old friend; General Firebrace's youngest daughter. I'm sending her round to see you. She needs advice—and help."

The way in which his sister stressed the last word alerted Bracknell to the possibility of trouble. Once before she had sent him a young man who needed help. The young man had since been detained in a criminal lunatic asylum and seemed likely to remain there.

©1999 by Michael Gilbert

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

He said, "What particular sort of help do you think she needs?"

"She's afraid that she may be going mad."

"Oh dear!"

"It's too soon to be certain. With help and sympathy she may easily recover her balance. In the past she has certainly shown herself to be a good businesswoman. Do you read the *Message of the Stars?"*

"Not knowingly."

"Then you don't follow racing?"

"I venture a pound or two on the Derby and the Grand National."

"If you were a serious student of racing"—Felicity managed to make it seem blameworthy that he was not—"you would certainly have run across the *Message of the Stars* It is clearly designed for people whose idea of picking a winner is to do it with a pin."

"Is there any other way?"

"Now you're being facetious. You know very well that serious followers of racing study the blooodlines on both sides of any horse they fancy, follow its current form, and weigh up the odds very carefully."

"And which method—the arbitrary or the painstaking—do the stars favour?"

"It was to prevent you making remarks like that when you see Louella that I telephoned you. She needs assistance, not mockery. You must see her today. There's no time to lose."

This was midday on Monday, and Bob's diary was already fairly full, but he had realised, at an early age, that it was no use saying no to his sister once her mind was made up.

"Tell her to come along at two o'clock," he said resignedly, "and I'll be able to give her half an hour."

One thing he had decided. He would have Mr. Piggin in with him when the lady arrived. His old managing clerk had a notably calming effect on hysterical girls.

Louella was a surprise.

When Felicity had said "the youngest daughter," he had pictured her as a flippant young female whose mind had been captivated by astrology. The woman he shook hands with was of roughly the same age as himself and had the look of a housewife used to controlling a husband and a brood of children. Troublesome children,

Michael Gilbert generally reserves his series characters for short stories rather than novels, and it has been our good fortune that he does so. It has allowed us to have exclusive publication of all fiction containing some of his most appealing characters—the current Fearne and Bracknell stories being an instance. Readers who enjoy the Gilbert novels will find a new title in print this year: *Into Battle* (Carroll & Graf).

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

maybe, which would account for the lines that framed a pair of gentle brown eyes.

She got down to the business in hand with a speed that Bob appreciated.

She extracted from her bag and laid on the desk a collection of printed papers. Reading them upside down, Bob saw that they were all headed, in capital letters, *The Message of the Stars,* followed by a date. Louella smoothed them on the desk with loving care.

"My life's work," she said. "Felicity tells me that you are not interested in racing, so they will not mean very much to you."

"I fear not."

"These are my last two dozen. They go out each Monday with tips for the racing at the weekend. I've been doing this for nearly five years. When I reached number two hundred my club subscribed for a brooch. Wasn't that kind?" She indicated a small silver horse's head with eyes that might have been rubies.

"Your club?"

"That sounds rather grand, doesn't it? When I started, most of my readers were friends and acquaintances. They paid ten pounds a year each, which gave me enough to cover my expenses. Some of my early tips came home at good odds, but it wasn't until I picked the winner of the Queen Mary Stakes at twenty-five to one—no one else fancied her—that things started to snowball. I got so many applicants that I raised the entry fee to fifty pounds, thinking it would choke people off."

"And naturally," said Bob, "this simply increased their keenness."

"New members now have to pay one hundred pounds and still they come. I award the horses one, two, or three stars—three stars denoting a special favourite. And—if there are horses which I feel are absolute duds, I give them a black mark. Occasionally a black-mark horse wins and the laugh is on me. It doesn't happen often. It's easier to pick losers than winners."

"And if you nominate a three-star horse, does that affect the market?"

"Shorten the odds, you mean. Yes, I think it must. Members are supposed to keep my tips to themselves, but you can't prevent them talking to their friends. On King Cophetua, for instance, in the Saint Hilda Handicap, my club members were able to get ante-post odds of twelve to one, whilst by the day of the meeting he'd been marked down to five to two."

"And he won?"

"Yes. By a short head."

"And can you remember how you arrived at that inspired tip?"

For the first time, Louella looked worried. She said, "Really, I can't explain exactly how I did it. A bit of it was because I fancied the jockey. You might say that I was following people more than

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

horses. Then again, I got a certain amount of help from my son, Malcolm. He's a major in a cavalry regiment, so he ought to know about horses."

Bob nearly said that a modern cavalry man was more interested in horsepower than in horses, but refrained. He divined that his client was coming to the matter that had upset her.

She said, "That was how it went, for a long time. I had one or two pieces of good luck and a few of bad luck. But now, suddenly, it's changed. Here's where you have to promise not to laugh."

"I promise."

"You described my tips as inspired. Until recently I shouldn't have used that description. I'd have said that they were partly the result of a careful study of form and partly of sheer guesswork. But recently, they have been, in fact, inspired. It happens at night. A little man stands by my bed and whispers. Just the name of a horse followed by a suggested ranking. One star, two stars, or three stars. He repeats it in an urgent whisper, until he sees that I'm awake. Then he disappears."

Bob had promised not to laugh, but it needed all his professional training and experience to keep a straight face. He said, "And how often has this—er—manifestation occurred?"

"So far, three times. Always on Saturday night. In good time for my circular to club members that goes out on Monday."

"And you adopted the suggestions which came to you in this way?"

"I felt so strongly that they were inspired that I was quite unable to depart from them. The first one—a three-star choice—was Sovereign, in the Trouville Claiming Stakes. He was the favourite and came home an easy winner. In the second case the horse I was told to give three stars to, Suvlac, was joint favourite before I tipped him and he won at very short odds. On the third occasion, I was told to give only one star to Hushaby, in the Middlehampton Maiden Stakes. He came in second, but at long enough odds to make an each-way bet profitable."

"What about last Saturday?"

"Once again I was told to give my three stars to a favourite, Barnabas, and a black mark to Tittup, who was already an outsider at twenty-five to one. If I condemn him, he will probably go down even further."

"And that's what you're going to do?"

"I haven't sent out my weekly sheet yet. I wanted your advice before I did so."

Bob said, speaking slowly, to give himself time to think and, hopefully, to give Mr. Piggin a chance to chip in, "So on three occasions your dwarf's advice has enhanced your reputation. And if you follow it this time you should certainly come to no harm."

"That's right."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"And you've still got to tell me what's upsetting you."

This produced a long pause. Then Louella said, "It's not easy to explain. But before this—this visitation—I was my own master. I'd done the things I ought to do, studied the pedigrees and the previous form of the runners, and made my own mind up. Now I was having my mind made up for me. I was in someone else's hands. I didn't like it."

"I appreciate that," said Bob. "May we start from one firm supposition? That your visitor is a figment of your imagination."

"I certainly think he must be. I occupy the top floor of a pretty solid Victorian building. There are two flats below mine. We all have a key to the front door. When we come in at night the arrangement is that we ring through to the caretaker, who lives in the basement, and tell him we're back. When we've all reported in, he bolts the front door. And I always bolt my own door as well."

"Doesn't sound easy for anyone to get in," agreed Bob. "Bolts are safer than locks. They can't be picked. What about windows?"

"The ground-floor windows are barred. That was done by the tenant, who's an art dealer and has a lot of valuable pictures. All the upper-storey windows have window locks. The insurance company insisted on that. But locks or no locks, I sleep with my bedroom window open. I've done so all my life and see no reason to change my habits."

"Drain pipes?"

"Nothing like that. There is a lightning conductor, but it's something you could hardly get the tips of your fingers round."

"Everything you tell me," said Bob, "strengthens my view that the messages you get come from inside your own head."

He looked at Mr. Piggin, who had been sitting quietly in the corner. He looked up from some notes he had been making, and said, "It certainly seems so. But I would like to borrow those predictions. And if I'm to understand them, I shall need some publication which gives details of the runners and the results."

"The *Racing Calendar*. You'll find it in the reference section of any public library."

Mr. Piggin thanked her gravely and accompanied her downstairs and out into the street, standing in the doorway for some minutes after she had left. When he got back to his own room he found Mr. Bracknell there.

"What do you make of it?" he said.

"Difficult," said Mr. Piggin.

"The way I see it—here's this lady—seems a sensible sort of person—"

"By no means hysterical," agreed Mr. Piggin.

"She's been handing out racing predictions for four or five years.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Now her mind has become so fixed on them that they follow her into her sleep."

"Quite possibly. There's just one thing that doesn't fit into that picture. Could you explain why Louella Firebrace should have been followed when she came here?"

"Followed? By a dwarf?"

"No. By an unpleasant character, known in criminal circles as Knocker Bates. An ex-boxer—very much ex—and a hanger-on of a racecourse gang."

"Are you sure?"

"Michael Donovan spotted him. And had him under observation for some minutes." Michael was their office boy and general factotum, who worked under Mr. Piggin and admired him greatly.

"He described him as having cauliflower ears and a broken nose—common enough in a pugilist—but also as having a totally bald head with a scar running across it from ear to ear. Which means it was Knocker, all right. He had evidently been following Miss Firebrace. When she came in he seemed to be interested in our plate. Mick could see his lips moving as he spelt out the words 'Fearne and Bracknell, Solicitors and Commissioners for Oaths.' When he'd digested all that he backed off and hasn't been seen since."

Bob said, "That certainly is odd. What's behind it, do you think?"

"It's too soon to jump to any conclusion. When I've studied all those papers and made one or two enquiries, I might be able to suggest something. At the moment I can only agree with you. It's odd."

For the next three days Mr. Piggin was exceptionally busy, even by his standards. He spent long hours reading and rereading the predictions of the stars and comparing them with the records in the *Racing Calendar*. This was followed by a round of visits to off-course bookmakers who informed him, with surprising unanimity, that business was bad; a fact which did not seem to inhibit them from driving expensive cars and smoking large cigars. After which, by arrangement with Miss Firebrace, he paid a visit to her flat and inspected the back of the building, from below and from above, and had a talk with the caretaker, a grizzled ex-policeman.

His next move had been less predictable. His interest appeared to have shifted to small theatres, music halls, and touring circuses, and he took a certain Levi Lexington, who seemed almost to monopolise bookings in these affairs, out to a liquid lunch at the Falstaff. By Friday morning he was able to present the four partners with an interim report.

"You must appreciate," he said, "that most of what I am going to say is theory. Very little hard fact. Though more may arrive on Saturday night."

"You mean," said Fearne, "when this dwarf next visits Miss Firebrace."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"That's what I hope. Indeed, what we learn then could clinch the matter."

"Then the dwarf really exists?"

"Very possibly. I have my eyes on a circus performer known as Little Al. 'Big Jim and Little Al.' They're a duo who specialise in gymnastic feats, one of which is a version of the Indian Rope Trick. Big Jim throws what is, apparently, a rope into the air and Little Al swarms up it. He climbs like a monkey, and would regard the scaling of the wall behind Miss Firebrace's flat as an elementary feat. The bars on the ground-floor window would give him an excellent start and the two windows above it would just be stems in a ladder. The top one, Miss Firebrace's sitting room, would be shut and locked. But he could reach across one finger behind the lightning conductor, get a knee onto the open bedroom window sill, and be inside in a matter of seconds. Incidentally, as a cross-reference, Big Jim was, at one time, a strong-arm member of the same racecourse gang that employed Knocker Bates."

When he had finished speaking, there was a moment of silence, broken by Bob Bracknell's son, Hugo. He said, "If this dwarf exists, and you've certainly made a case for it, ought we to allow him to get into Miss Firebrace's bedroom? Shouldn't he be stopped?"

"The difficulty is that we shall have no real confirmation of my theory until we know what the dwarf is going to say. Let me explain. I think that what he and his backers are up to is what bookmakers call a two-horse trick. Suppose that an owner has two horses running in the same race. Probably a race with a smallish field. Horse A is the stable star, and in view of the modest opposition will start at very short odds—possibly odds-on. Horse B has never won a race—at least, in this country. He may have notched up a success or two on the continent, but in this country his form has been dire. If you have both the trainer and the jockey in your pocket, it is easy enough to ensure that a good horse runs badly. So Horse B is quoted at fifty to one. He has a modicum of support, because his pedigree is good and he is handled by an expert trainer. No one, except the people who are behind the ramp, knows one salient fact: that in a number of very privately conducted trial runs, *Horse B has consistently beaten Horse A.* Nor are they to know that in the hour before the 'Off' very large sums of money have been staked, with half a dozen out-of-town bookmakers, on Horse B."

"I follow that," said Bob. "But it's obviously a ramp that needs long and careful working up. So how can you be sure that they're planning to bring it to a head this week?"

"They'll have been told that the lady on whom they've been relying to crown their efforts—three stars for Horse A, a black mark for Horse B—has consulted her solicitors. So, no time to waste."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Fearne's daughter, Tara, said, "All the same, I don't think we ought to allow our client to run any risk."

Her father said, "I agree. A decision in the matter will have to come from her. We must ask her round and put the facts, as we see them, before her."

"In which case," said Mr. Piggin, "might we not offer her a measure of protection? If she invites her soldier son, Malcolm, to sleep in the flat over the weekend, he could rig up a simple alarm system. A bell or buzzer that sounds in her son's room, connected to a switch by her bed. She could have her hand on it when the dwarf appears. But not press it until after he has delivered the Message of the Stars."

"I can't tell you how deeply relieved I am," said Louella.

"'Relieved?'" said Fearne. It was the last reaction he had expected when he had explained Mr. Piggin's ideas to her and had invited her to act as the cheese in the trap they were setting.

"Deeply relieved," said Miss Firebrace firmly. "If this dwarf really exists, then the whole situation is changed. He's not just a figment of my fevered and unbalanced imagination."

Fearne, who felt, by now, a considerable admiration for the lady, thought he had rarely seen anyone less fevered and unbalanced. He said, "If you're willing to cooperate, it will certainly narrow the field."

"I can narrow it even further. You spoke of a smallish number of runners and of long odds. The two things are not consistent. For instance, if you examine last week's results at Brighton, where there were never more than seven runners in each race—I am speaking from memory—no horse was quoted at longer odds than ten to one."

"Correct," said Mr. Piggin, who was elbow-deep in paper.

"You only really get odds of fifty or a hundred to one in races like the Grand National. If you're looking for odds around twenty-five to one, you'll have to concentrate on the larger fields. There were two at thirty-three to one at Ripon last week. In both cases a sizeable number of starters."

"Sixteen in one case, eighteen in the other," murmured Mr. Piggin.

"The predictions I send out every Monday are for a meeting either on the Friday or the Saturday. When we see what the dwarf has to suggest we can easily see which meeting and which race he has in mind."

"Hopefully you're right," said Fearne. "And you must pass the information to us at once. Then we can make up our minds what your Monday message to your club members is to be."

For the first time it seemed to occur to him, but to no one else, that this might be the most difficult step in an operation that was tricky enough already.

❖ ❖ ❖

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

For all her cultivated calm, Louella was finding it difficult to get to sleep. It was a comforting thought that her resolute, fifteen-stone son was sleeping one room away. She hoped that he was not sleeping too soundly. She passed her fingers over the switch beside her hand.

The quarter-past one from St. Barnabas Church sounded clearly through the wide-open window. The sky outside was blue-black, lit by an army of stars. Remote points of crystal light. She stared at them, wondering how she could have been so presumptuous as to suppose that they could interest themselves in mundane matters.

Half-past one.

The stars were blotted out by a shape that slid silently through the window and came sidling across the moonlit floor like a huge and horrible crab.

Miss Firebrace summoned her soldier ancestors to her aid and held her breath.

"Three stars for Sir Dominic, a black mark for October Lad."

As the urgent whisper sounded, inches from her ear, she contrived to grunt and roll away, pretending not to hear.

Then the words came again, more clearly and urgently than she had ever heard them before. Not advice now, more a command. She moved her hand over the switch and pressed it.

The sound of the bell was clearly audible. A few seconds' pause was followed by the pounding of steps in the passage as her son burst into the room.

She said, "You'll see him better if you don't turn the light on." They crowded into the window. "There he goes," said Malcolm. "What a mover. Did you get the message?"

"Yes," said Louella, choking back a feeling compounded equally of outrage and relief. "I got it."

Louella had brought the news to the partners herself, after breakfast on Sunday morning. Her son had refused to come with her. He was angry at his failure to catch the dwarf after a break-neck descent of the stairs and an eruption through the back door.

Louella was inclined to be philosophical. She said, "I'm just glad that we've cleared it up. I wouldn't care to go through all that again."

"Nor should you," said Tara warmly. She had been opposed all along to Louella running risks.

Bob said, "So now we know. It's the Sedgefield Handicap at Southwell that they've got their eyes on. Horse A is Sir Dominic and Horse B is October Lad."

"Different owners," said Hugo. "Sweeny—Clark."

"But not all that different," said Mr. Piggin, "when you consider that Charles Sweeny is Bill Clark's nephew."

Bob said, "And the odds have worked out in the way we expected.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Sir Dominic a clear favourite at five to two; twenty-five to one currently quoted on October Lad. If your message tomorrow blacks October Lad he may go out still further. Maybe thirty-three to one."

There was a short silence. All eyes were on Fearne, who was the only one who had not spoken. Finally he said, addressing Louella, "Have you, in fact, considered what your Monday message is to be?"

The question seemed to surprise her. She said, "To tell you the truth, I was so relieved that you'd identified that horrible dwarf that I hadn't really thought about it. I suppose—well—it's not going to be easy, is it?"

"It's an extremely difficult problem."

"I suppose you could always—" and she stopped, realising that she really had no sensible suggestion to offer.

Fearne said, speaking slowly, "If you analyse the position you'll see that you have three courses open to you. Each of them has its own, quite serious, drawbacks. Number one, you could do exactly what the dwarf has told you to do. Three stars for Sir Dominic, a black mark for October Lad. This will be the clincher that the men behind the dwarf have been playing for. It will confirm and support the misleading picture that they have been carefully painting. However, if you do so, particularly now that you have every reason to suspect what is going on, you will have made yourself an accessory to the scheme. Not a comfortable thought, is it?"

"It certainly isn't," said Louella.

"On the other hand, you could reverse the order. Give three stars to October Lad and black Sir Dominic, which might, now, be a more honest statement of your opinion. Your recent successes must have made a number of punters prepared to follow you blindly. Though I doubt whether you could reverse the odds, you could certainly affect them dramatically. But by doing so you will have earned the enmity of a powerful and unscrupulous set of men. The dwarf will have told them what happened last night, and they will be on the lookout for trouble. If crossed, they can be extremely unpleasant."

"Oh dear," said Louella. "What am I to do, then?"

"As I said, there is a third course open to you. Rather than making any prediction at all, you could simply announce your retirement. If you do so, I fear that the newer members of your club, who joined at a hundred pounds, will be disappointed. They will feel that they are not getting their money's worth. They may even be tempted to sue you."

"Oh, no. That, at least, is impossible. When the fees started to mount, I took Felicity's advice. She said that any new member should sign an agreement that I was under no obligation to continue advising. That was a condition of his membership."

"And you got that, in writing, each time?"

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Signed and witnessed."

"I always knew my sister was a better lawyer than I was," said Bob. "It looks as though course three is the winner."

There was a general murmur of agreement.

Louella gave a great sigh of relief. "I can't tell you how grateful I am. That's just what I'll do. Announce my temporary retirement. Then, if things straighten out, I can always start again."

On the Saturday at Southwell, October Lad led the field of fifteen runners in the Sedgefield Handicap and ran out an easy winner at twenty-five to one.

On the Monday morning the partners met to discuss the work of the week ahead. This looked like being heavy. Captain Burd's wife had finally made up her mind to divorce him, and the Rumpole estate was coming up for auction. Then an awkward case of assault on a schoolboy had arrived, in the form of a distraught headmaster, at an early hour that morning.

When these matters had been fully discussed, Mr. Piggin coughed and said, addressing Mr. Fearne, "If I might revert, for a moment, to a problem which we managed to solve last week, to the satisfaction, I think, of all parties. When you, sir, presented an admirable analysis of the three courses open to us, it did occur to me that there was a fourth, and additional, step that might be taken. In pursuance of this idea I managed to raise the sum of one thousand pounds and placed it, through a number of bookmakers known to me, on October Lad."

The deep silence which this statement produced was broken by Bob.

"Then—good heavens—you made yourself twenty-five thousand pounds."

"Not for myself," said Mr. Piggin gently. "Since the facts about the horse had come to me in the course of the firm's business, I naturally considered the winnings belonged to the firm. I felt that I was entitled to what you might call a commission, so after deducting five thousand, I have transferred the balance of twenty thousand to the distributable profits of the partnership. Tax free, of course."

"Well," said Fearne, "that's extremely handsome."

"Very handsome," said Bob and Hugo in unison.

Tara said nothing. She was busy spending her share.

When they had got their breath back, Bob said, "It was a daring coup. But if October Lad hadn't won, I hope you will accept that the partnership must have repaid you your stake." ●

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

NEST

by Peter Turnbull

Jennifer Ooms and Tim de Roule were lovers. At least to an observer who saw them in passing, they would appear to have been lovers, walking hand in hand along a pathway which threaded between the woods on one hand and a green meadow on the other, one evening, one summer, in Scotland, just to the north of the city of Glasgow. A warm, still evening in which swifts and blue tits dived and turned to catch high-flying insects. Two people, one man, one woman, hand in hand, on such an evening, a picture of youth, of affection, of hope, of future. It was, in fact, the summer to end all summers, the summer that broke climatic records, the summer that folk still talk about and will continue to talk about for many years; a summer of reservoirs drying up, of broadcast warnings about overexposure of flesh to the sun. The summer had begun at Easter, early for Scotland, and had only grudgingly given over to autumn in October, late for Scotland, an autumn which in turn had heralded a winter of surpassing mildness. It was a summer that the great majority of the population of Scotland would remember with fondness, but only the great majority, because there exist those who, for some dark reason, like only cold and shadowy places. And also for personal reasons would one or two folk prefer to forget that summer, remembering it only because it was the time of great tragedy, or of some sight seen which once seen was impossible to erase from memory.

One such man was Fraser Yuill, who was twenty-five years old that summer and a post-graduate student in the Computer Science department at the new concrete and glass angular complex that is Strathclyde University. One morning that summer—it would have been the morning after the evening on which an observer would have seen Jennifer Ooms and Tim de Roule walking together and thought "lovers"—Fraser Yuill was jogging along the path which was between the meadow and the wood, as he did each morning except those in the very depths of winter, when he came upon the man beside a tree in a near-sitting position, his head lolling to one side, a black congealed gash over his right ear. Adjacent to the young man, on the grass in the meadow, lay the body of a young woman, facedown, her clothing torn and in disarray. She was still and, to all appearances, lifeless.

©1999 by Peter Turnbull

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Similarly, Mr. and Mrs. Ooms would not forget that summer: It was that summer that a solemn young constable knocked at their door to tell them that their daughter, identified by the bus pass in her purse, was, at that moment, critically ill in the Glasgow Royal Infirmary. He wondered if they could attend as soon as was convenient to confirm her identity because she had not regained consciousness and might be comatose. For a similar reason, Sadie and Mick de Roule would not forget that summer: That was the summer that an equally solemn constable had knocked on their door to advise them that their son Timothy was deceased. He had asked if they could attend the mortuary of the G.R.I. to identify the body.

Three years later, Mrs. Ooms, who had been abandoned by her husband shortly after the attack on her daughter, still did not feel that she knew the de Roule family well, and the de Roules felt they did not know Mrs. Ooms. But for all of those three years they had envied each other greatly. And each Christmas they exchanged cards. Mrs. Ooms envied the de Roules because despite the fact that the murder of their son was a tragedy without parallel, the fact remained that they still, she thought, had each other. They had two other sons and a daughter, and by their daughter they had had grandchildren. They could, she thought, at least bury Tim, have each other, support each other, pick up the pieces, and carry on. At least they knew. She, on the other hand, was by herself, her only child hovering permanently between life and death in a bed in the G.R.I., not having regained consciousness since the attack, officially "comatose," by no means brain dead, but sleeping a long, long, long sleep. And the de Roules, in turn, envied Mrs. Ooms because for her each day brought hope; her daughter may not have spoken, woken even, for three years, but neither had she been taken from her. Mrs. Ooms had not had to endure the ceremony of the headstone and the hole for one of her children. But they, the de Roules, felt that they had had to endure two holes, one that was filled and one that was created.

Daily, for three years, Mrs. Ooms visited her daughter, bathed her face and hands, tidied her bed linen, brought her gifts of cards at Christmas and on her birthday. She ensured that the tapes of familiar sounds were still being played to her via earphones. Then, one November afternoon, Jennifer Ooms opened her eyes.

She blinked.

She said, "Hello, Mum."

Ray Sussock was a man in his sixties. He had a lean, craggy face, he wore a battered felt trilby, and his shoulders were draped in a coat which had lost its shape and hung like sacking. His trousers shone with age, his shoes were scuffed, and an observer, should he be close enough, would notice that Ray Sussock was wearing odd

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

socks, not just a forgivable shade-of-grey difference, but one blue, one brown. In company with Ray Sussock was Malcolm Montgomerie, twenty-six years of age, chiselled features, downturned moustache, jet-black hair which he kept neatly groomed, as designer-clothed as his salary would allow—today a tan leather jacket, red polo-neck sweater, blue trousers, feet comforted by Italian shoes of the softest leather. Ray Sussock was a detective sergeant, Malcolm Montgomerie a detective constable. They walked the locus of the offence together, walking over the ground where life had been, where love may have been, where death had come to a young man, and darkness to a young woman.

They walked on, over rough pasture covered by autumn cold, separated from each other by a distance of fifteen, perhaps twenty feet. To their right was the green patch of broad-leafed woodland, of oak and elm; a path ran along the edge of the wood snaking towards the village of Ale. The name of the village was nothing to do with the beer consumed in its only pub, but rather it was a corruption of an ancient Celtic word whose exact meaning was known only to scholars. The path connected Ale to the road to Glasgow, meeting the road at the bus stops, one on either side of the road. Beyond the rooftops of Ale were the blue hills of the Trossachs; beyond them, the grey skies of a Scottish November.

"Somewhere here?" asked Montgomerie.

"Exactly here." Sussock nodded to a tree. "I remember yon tree. She was . . . well, she was lying just about where you are standing now. We believe he was walking her to the bus stop after a night in the pub, to catch the Glasgow bus." He paused. "It's one of the ones I remember, you know, there's always one or two that reach you."

"I've had a few myself." Montgomerie stepped towards Sussock. "I know what you mean."

"Aye, what cop hasn't?" Sussock's attention was caught by a squirrel, a red squirrel, rare these days, hopping, pausing, then hopping again. He'd noticed many squirrels over recent days, all feverish, all bold, showing little fear of humans, and he was thus convinced that this coming winter would be a bad one. Feverish squirrels in the autumn always meant a hard winter in Sussock's view, as did the abundance of berries evident on the shrubs. He was particularly wary of cold winters; thin air went for his chest. A legacy of his being a lifetime smoker and a late quitter was that now he feared the thin air of winter stabbing his chest. The bronchial pain always seemed to slice knifelike between his ribs. "Aye, but you know, the more years you get in, the worse things have to be before they reach you. But she reached me, so she did—young lassie, clothes everywhere but where they should be, face-down, all her years ahead of her, and then suddenly snatched away. Least I thought that then, found out later she was in a coma,

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

but the sight of her lying there, it was one which stayed with me."

"And he was by that tree, you say?"

Sussock nodded. "That's the odd thing, he was sitting, almost, hardly a mark on him apart from a wee gash by his ear. Clothes still neat and tidy and she was lying on the ground, blood everywhere, clothes torn and ripped, pulled down and up, yet she had the pulse and he had not. He had none, no pulse at all."

"Murder weapon?" Montgomerie asked as he and Sussock stepped onto the path together, their leading feet meeting the compact soil of the path utterly simultaneously.

"Not found. I thought you'd read the file?"

"I . . ."

"Never mind. But no, not found. It was ye well-known instrument, blunt, felon for the use of. The pathologist thought a hammer, a ball hammer, a single blow to the side of the head for the lad. That did for him, he had an unusually thin skull, suggesting that a fatal blow wasn't the intention. The girl seemed to have attempted to run away, and then struggled, the turf of the pasture here was scuffed. She sustained quite a few blows. It seemed as though the perp knocked the lad on the head to put him out of business for a wee while and then turned his attention on the girl and gave her his undivided, possibly hoping to put her out of the game permanently."

"He didn't get the result he wanted."

"Didn't at all, totally the opposite. Nothing to go on forensically, the girl bit her fingernails right back to the quick."

"Nothing to scratch with."

"And nothing to catch fibre, bits of skin, hair—anything that victims of assault normally capture with their nails. In this case, nothing to help us at all."

The two men stood and surveyed the scene. A rook cawed, another squirrel ran up the bark of a tree.

"Going to be a hard winter," Montgomerie offered.

"Rather wish that you hadn't said that." Sussock pondered the chest pains ahead of him.

"Any suspects?"

"A whole village full." Sussock began to walk on. "The attack was a chance attack or it was perpetrated by someone who had local knowledge. We opted for local knowledge, a local boy, an attack at ten o'clock at night . . ."

"Point taken. Did the guy have enemies?"

"Not that we were able to find out. Just a regular lad, ordinary family, no bad news that we could find. We ought to call on his family, they live near here, they did three years ago anyway."

"The wood." Montgomerie glanced at his right-hand side.

"What about it?"

"Has it always been so overgrown? I mean, that bracken,

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

those shrubs, the old branches."

"Aye." Sussock continued to look ahead of him at the roofs of Ale, nestling in a fold of the hills, the promise of heat, of thicker air to breathe. "Aye, in fact, if I remember, it's thinned out a wee bit."

"Not easily penetrated."

"Could hide an army in it."

"See, that's my point, Sarge." Montgomerie zipped up his jacket against a suddenly chill breeze. "As you say, you could hide an army in that lot and if you were hiding in there you couldn't get out in a hurry."

"So?"

"Well, doesn't it mean that the attacker had time to approach them without their taking flight, or was just standing on the path waiting for them? See, the point I'm making is that not only were the victims and the perpetrator known to each other but they had some form of relationship. What I'm thinking is, not only did the lad and the lassie know their attacker, but they knew him . . . "

"Or her . . ."

"Or her, in such a way that they felt safe in approaching. To put it another way, the perpetrator would have to be part of the family circle, or part of the circle of friends of one or the other or both. . . This is me just thinking aloud . . . because with all that undergrowth, the wood couldn't have had anything to do with it. I reckon that if we draw up a list of family and friends, the perp will be on that list. Is that what you think, now, three years on?"

Sussock glanced away from Montgomerie and looked up at the tops of the trees, at rooks flying, at squirrels squirrelling . . . searching for somewhere to go in his discomfort.

"Jennifer's speaking! She's awake and speaking." The woman beamed with her round face, though her eyes didn't seem married to her facial expression, in Sussock's view. Her home was cluttered in a manner of enforced rather than of logical neatness. Importantly, to Sussock, it was warm. His chest felt comfortable. "She was a handsome lass."

"Still is."

"Aye, it's a manner of speaking. What's she saying?"

"Not a lot, but she will be, she recognised her mother so she has all her faculties."

Sussock sat opposite the woman. The woman's youngest son, Brian, Sussock recalled his name being, stood behind his mother. Sussock couldn't help but notice how worried Brian de Roule looked. Montgomerie stood behind Sussock, and he also noticed Brian de Roule's discomfort.

"Her mum, aye, she goes to see her daughter each day and every day." The woman smiled, but her eyes were distant. "I know, I

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

went just the once and the nurses told me Jennifer's mother visits each day and attends to her, washing her, playing tapes of familiar sounds, so she does."

"Well, she was there when Jennifer opened her eyes and said, 'Hello, Mum,' and then closed her eyes again."

"She's not back in the coma?"

"I don't believe so, but coming out of a coma is a gradual process, you don't just wake up, it's not a sudden switching on of the lights. She's been out cold for three years, can't expect her to wake up as though she's just had an afternoon's nap. She seems to know where she is, but we don't know what she can recall about the attack, if anything. It may well be that she can't, and never will, remember anything. Island amnesia is not uncommon." As he said that Sussock noticed how Brian de Roule appeared to relax.

Montgomerie noticed it, too.

"It's good of you to call and let me know what has happened."

"It's a wee bit more than that." Sussock smiled. "We've walked over the locus and we have called to see you and your family to go over the incident again, to see if you've remembered anything, see if we have missed anything. So, just you and your sons and daughter and husband in the house, as I recall?"

"No. We've had big changes, some good, some bad."

"Oh?"

"Aye, well, my man's away."

"Sorry."

"He left, just a few weeks ago."

"Oh, I thought you meant he . . ."

"He just woke up one morning and said that he was going, so he left, didn't he, Brian?"

"Aye," said Brian.

"But he's like that. He'll come back when the fancy takes him, won't he, Brian?"

"Aye."

"And our Wendy's away. She's married, one wee girl and another little one on the way. Our David's in Australia, so he is."

"So there's just yourself and Brian here now? Big changes, as you say."

"Aye, it seemed that that day started big changes for this house." Sadie de Roule's eyes ran over the brasses on her mantelpiece and in the hearth. "What mother could forget that day, the day her son died? I relive it every day. I had four children in this house and now I've the one. See, Tim died, then it got bad, it got too much for my other son David, his twin. David was the eldest by four minutes, always fighting all their wee lives and then when time was . . . well, it got too much for David. He just pined away and left. . . . That's them in happier times." Mrs. de Roule nodded to

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

a photograph on the sideboard which showed two young men standing shoulder to shoulder, stripped to the waist, working in a garden, pausing to beam at the camera. "Tim died and then David left."

"Left?"

"Went to Australia. Pining for Tim, see, really upset. We were all upset, but David was worst, took it bad, really bad. He changed, became moody, something left him, so it did. He couldn't stay . . . said he couldn't live in Ale; people in the village kept looking at him, saying things about him. Some just stared in shock, thinking it was Tim they'd seen, as if a dead man couldn't have a twin."

"So he went to Australia?"

"Aye. He took a wee while to settle—he got into bother with the police."

"He did?"

"Fighting, barroom brawls, but Australian beer makes you aggressive, so I'm told. Always lots of fights in Australian bars . . . but he's settled down now. I mean, there's been no mention of any more trouble for the last month or so."

"Month or so?"

"Aye, that's settled for David. He's got a young lady and he's got a job."

"So, that day?"

"Oh, I go over it in my mind again and again. She was such a nice lassie. She was well kent to us, for years really."

"I didn't know that. I thought she and Tim . . ."

"Aye, but before that, it was her and David. Her and David were a couple. David was really fond of her, so he was, but it didn't work out. Jennifer couldn't cope with David's temper. David has a temper, Tim didn't . . . that was the big difference between them. They were twins, they looked the same, but their personalities . . . like chalk and cheese, Mr. . . . ?"

"Sussock," said Sussock, noting again the obvious discomfort of Brian de Roule.

"David was really fond of her, so he was, but it didn't work out. See, Jennifer, well, she just couldn't cope with David's temper . . ."

Both cops felt something. They felt it individually but both knew the other had also felt it. Something about the family, something unsaid, perhaps something not known to all members, especially not known to Mrs. de Roule . . . Here, in her shiny, brassy house, so sincere, so open, so genuine, and not realizing she was in the dark. Brian's clear discomfort said so.

"You were fond of Jennifer yourself?" Sussock probed.

"Aye, she was a bonny lass, bonny to look at, bonny character, she'd've done either of my boys well."

"Either?"

"Either. Could do still, if David came home."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Mother . . . " Brian said pleadingly.

Montgomerie picked him up. "Got something to offer, son?"

Brian de Roule shook his head. "No, nothing."

He left the room; Montgomerie followed him.

Sussock, left alone with Mrs. de Roule, pressed her. "Either?"

"Of my boys. Well, David and Tim, the terrible twins..." She smiled as if recalling a pleasant memory. "David was with Jennifer first."

"So you said."

"Aye, they had a wee thing going, but it all went sour on them. David's fault, really. I'm his mother—it doesn't mean I was blind to his faults"

"Tell me."

"Well, they were twins. They were the terrible twins, all right, but not in that way, you know, always in trouble. My twins were never in any trouble out of the house, but in the house . . . fighting, even in their crib. . . . I tell you, we had to separate them even before they could walk."

The clock on the wall chimed the hour and then the clock played "The Flower of Scotland": ridiculous, in Sussock's opinion. The Westminster chimes he could understand, but the twee "Flower of Scotland" on the hour, each hour . . . it would drive him insane.

"God, aye," said the woman, "such battles they two had, fighting, fighting, terrible in their way, but it was always David's fault. David was always picking on Tim and Tim was always defending himself. They were evenly matched, but David always started the fighting; he had a viciousness that Tim never had. I mean, he'd pounce on Tim for no reason, set traps for him. . . ."

"Set traps . . . ?"

"I maybe should have taken them to a doctor or a child psychologist, but it was Jack, my man, said no. He wouldn't allow it. He didn't like doctors, didn't Jack. I didn't either. I mean, that's where we met. Gartloch."

"The village?"

"No, the hospital."

"Ah."

"Aye, but not the locked wards; we were both voluntary patients. Long term, but voluntary, right enough. Jack was in longer than me. He was in for five years against my two. And I never went back, but Jack was in and out."

Sussock felt very worried and very relieved. He was relieved that he felt he understood, but worried about what he understood; and then followed a sudden sinking feeling. This joyful, proud opening of the closet and parading of skeletons of the sort that other families would keep hidden . . . this disarming, eager-to-please honesty. He realised that he was in a family whose health, whose psychiatric health, was questionable—not just

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

one member's health, but the health of the whole family.

"I had some money, it was inherited, so we left the east end of Glasgow, where we were kent as mad, and came here to Ale. We were not kent here. Had four children. Just one left at home now, wee Brian."

"Just Brian," Sussock echoed.

"Aye, but Jennifer and David, they'd've been wed if it wasn't for David's temper. David was sore at losing Jennifer but he fair lost his head when she turned up on Tim's arm."

Malcolm Montgomerie stood in the small back garden of the house of de Roule and spoke to Brian de Roule. They stood shoulder to shoulder with their backs to the house. Brian de Roule held his head down, doing what he could to avoid eye contact.

"Fond of your brothers, were you?"

A nod of the head.

"Both about the same, or one more than the other?"

A shrug of the shoulders.

"Lost them both, anyway; I mean, in a sense."

A magpie flew overhead with a straw in its beak. "Nest-building," said Brian de Roule. "Early this year."

"Aye, it'll be a hard winter," said Montgomerie, "harder for some than others."

"Just like two wee birds." Mrs. de Roule smiled a glassy-eyed smile. "Always trying to push each other out of the nest. No, that's not right. David was always trying to push Tim out of the nest. Tim was always able to resist him."

"So things didn't work between David and Jennifer, they split up, and Jennifer took up with Tim. What happened when David found out?"

"Well, see . . . well, he had a wee tantrum."

"A wee tantrum?"

"See, well, ye ken how all the furniture and the decoration in this room is new, about three years old? Well, that sort of wee tantrum."

Scene: A corridor in the Glasgow Royal Infirmary, filled with hospital bustle. WPC Willems and Mrs. Ooms sit on a bench together.

Mrs. Ooms: I was so pleased when she'd finished with that lad. Then she said that she was going out with his brother. I could hardly believe it. See, David, his glassy-eyed expression, he said all the right things but he always gave the impression of being elsewhere—in his head, I mean. Like he was scheming. I didn't take to him. There was no future for Jennifer with him. She saw that herself, but I

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

worried anyway. . . . Do you have children?

WPC Willems: No.

Mrs. Ooms: They're the bane of your life, they're the worry of your life, but they make your life, so they do. Our Jenny was such a bonny lass.

WPC Willems: She still is.

Mrs. Ooms: Aye, and she's . . . what's that expression the doctor used . . . "with us." She's still bonny and still with us. No brain damage, but these years past I've been thinking of her as she was, not as she's been, so I say she "was" a bonny lass, but you're right, she still is.

WPC Willems: You've got your daughter back, Mrs. Ooms.

Mrs Ooms: So I have. It's a pity she had to learn about bad men so hard. I mean, I know that the hardest lessons are the best learned but did it have to be *that* hard? I . . . you would have thought that her experience with that boy would have been enough to warn her about that family. It would warn me off, but then she went out with his twin brother.

WPC Willems: She did?

Mrs. Ooms: Just the once. He kept pestering her. He wouldn't take no. Jennifer said she thought he was more interested in scoring a point off his twin brother than he was interested in her, but she went anyway—for a drink in the pub in Ale—that's where the family live. He was to put her on the bus home. But giving in to him like that . . . for that reason.

WPC Willems: Fatal.

Mrs. Ooms: Well, it nearly was, wasn't it?

WPC Willems: Sorry, that was a bit tactless of me.

A pause.

Mrs. Ooms: You know, what really gets me is her going with him for that one drink knowing that those twins hated each other like poison. All she wanted to do was settle and start building her wee nest like any young woman, and she lets herself get flaunted by one twin to the other. . . . I mean, talk about lighting the blue touch paper. How could she?

"There's another." Brian de Roule nodded at a red squirrel scurrying up a tree trunk. "Lots of squirrels about right now, laying in stock for the winter. All they wee nests."

Montgomerie didn't reply. The breeze tugged at his collar; he eyed low-scudding clouds and hoped the rain would keep off. He wanted to hold this situation with Brian de Roule. He felt that he

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

was close, close, close to what filmmakers might call "a wrap." Then he said, "Remember that day, Brian?"

"Aye. I ken it well. The day your brother dies, you don't forget that day."

"David was envious of Tim?"

"Aye"—a sheepish grin—"he was fair raging. When he found out, he smashed up the house. I'd just come back. Wished I were away again."

"You'd been away?"

"Aye . . . doing my stint in Ward One. At Gartloch. We've all been in one time or another, so we have. That's where my parents met. Tim and David have been in, I've been in, and Sadie, she's been in, too, but all voluntary . . . none of us have ever been sectioned."

"Good." Montgomerie felt a sinking feeling which began to gnaw at his stomach and wouldn't go away. "I mean, good that you cooperated. It's always better to cooperate."

"That's what they said."

"So that day?" Close . . . Close . . . Closer.

"That evening—a summer evening in the pub—Dave was there, I was there, Tim and Jennifer were sitting there together, holding hands. Dave couldn't take it, he had all he could do to control himself in the pub. He walked out, left early, said he was going for a walk."

"Did Dave know which way, I mean by which route Tim would be walking Jennifer to the bus stop?"

"Och aye, he knew. Yon path by the woods."

"Thanks, Brian, I appreciate it."

"I was cooperative, aye?"

"Very."

Brian de Roule smiled.

Walking back from Ale, past the locus of the offence of three years earlier, back to where they had parked their car, Montgomerie said, "Sarge, that family . . ."

"I know." Sussock nodded. "I know." But his thoughts dwelt upon the process of extradition from Australia and on why, oh why, why, why, he hadn't seen. He was the investigating officer. It was so obvious. . . . It was now, it was then. . . .

He asked Montgomerie to drive back to Glasgow, he felt too upset and ill at ease to do it himself.

On the return journey, they were diverted by radio to attend a situation in the Saracen. A young couple, both known to be possessed of extreme religious beliefs, had "saved" their two young children by strangling them and had then climbed to the uppermost landing of their tenement and had sat down to await the Flood. Montgomerie and Sussock arrived as the couple were being led quietly through a hushed and saddened crowd and into a waiting ambulance. ●

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

THE MOST BEAUTIFUL WOMAN ON STATEN ISLAND

by Laurence M. Janifer

The old Romans had a saying, that was *omnia vincit amor,* love beats the whole of it. I am not all that sure it does, but it is a certain thing that love gives the whole of everything else the hell of a battle.

The most beautiful woman on Staten Island ceded away her maidenhood, and married, in the year of 1970, at the age of thirty-eight. I'll tell you how that came to be, and as far as anyone can know it, why, but you'll have to hear a bit first about Neilan Ocharan and about Cam Bradenoy, and about Staten Island as it was in the year of 1950, and is to this day, more than people think it remains. I'll go lightly on the island, and there'll be no maps.

Laurence Janifer last appeared in *EQMM* back in the 1950s, but he was busy writing all through the intervening years, primarily in the field of science fiction. A regular, forty-year-plus contributor to our sister publication *Analog Science Fiction and Fact,* and a novelist in both the science fiction and mystery genres, Mr. Janifer has covered all the bases yet maintained his unique voice.

And you'll have to know about the woman, to be sure, or why am I telling this at all? Her name was as lovely as herself: Edbhinne Wendover. If you're not familiar with the Gaelic language, or don't know many Irish folk, you may never have so much as heard that there are lovely women with the name of Edbhinne, but there are many. You'll say it E-veen, going very quick on the E, and drawing all the rest out like a caress, a hand light on her cheek.

Now all of these people I'm telling you about were Irish folk, but not in Ireland proper, neither Waterford nor Cork. The Irish have spread over the world, as you must know, to civilize it, and those who've stayed at home have, at times, felt themselves so shut in

©1999 by Laurence M. Janifer

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

and out of the world that they've gone mad and begun blowing each other up with rounds and explosives. But they that went to the world have kept their sanity, and kept their Irish selves as well, and that was the way of it with the Ocharans and the Bradenoys and the Wendovers, a generation and more before the year of 1950 I'm telling you of. By that year (and Neilan Ocharan was twenty-four in it, and Cam Bradenoy thirty-one, and Edbhinne Wendover just turning eighteen in its April, and more beautiful than the month itself) they were all citizens of the United States and residents of the city of New York, and inhabitants of Staten Island, which is, in the city of New York, a very odd thing indeed for anyone to be.

All of that city is itself a handful of islands (there's a bit of the Bronx on the mainland of the United States, but it's a small bit and scarce counts, and doesn't come into this story at all), and Staten Island is like an island of the islands, an outsider's place. It's a borough to itself, one of the five, but in the other four, in Brooklyn and Manhattan, Queens and the Bronx, you'll recognize the New Yorker anywhere, and he'll be much what you expect him to be, and so will she: They're nervous, quick people, very bright as a rule and very high-strung. The ones with fists will bash you as soon as see you, and the ones with tongues will slash you as soon as hear you, and the four boroughs are filled with the sounds of battle and parade. Not bad sounds in their way, but the one small island that makes a fifth borough is a quieter place, and birds sing in it, and the working insects chirr.

These late years, since the bridge went in and passage is an easier thing, there's been a great deal of building on the island, and large tracts of it look almost as if they could pass for the city, in a dim enough light. But in the year of 1950 the bridge was far in the mist, not built nor thought of, and though there were streets and houses, stores and small factories, the New Yorker you'd recognize as a New Yorker seldom visited the island, as seldom thought of it, and when he did think of it, knew well that island folk were country folk—hicks and bumpkins, he'd have said, and she'd have said, too.

Those qualities called to some. The police have lived on the island since first there were houses there, and the mob folk as well, and both for the same sole reason: The place offers rest after a day and a night spent in taming the city folk. On the island, as a rule, there's been always a truce among such groups, and they live in peace side by side, so long as they're at home. When they travel over to the other boroughs, they drop all thought of truce, and fight each other like the wild men they are, and the women cut each other stone dead in street or mart. But at home there's peace, because there's peace on the island, and that is what the island is for.

So it was with the Ocharans, who were police in the time of Neilan's father and his grandfather, and kept much order in their

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

streets at work with hands of iron and clubs of dark hardwood, and the Bradenoys, who were mob folk long before that, in the middle of the last century when the Irish mobs ruled tracts in all the city of New York, borough after borough, like brawling kings.

By the year of 1950, such days were no more than a memory, if no less. Neilan Ocharan kept what order he could on the streets he'd been assigned, though he rode down them in an auto with a partner and seldom trod them on his own legs. He did his work well, what there was of it, and if he kept less order than his father had, or his grandfather, too, he kept all he could from his auto. His partner was a Greek lad with the name of Basil, but Neilan was as true to him as if he'd been called Seamas; Basil also lived on the island, though in a newer house, being himself the first generation of Theodicopolouses to be of the police.

And Cam Bradenoy ruled little. The old days of the Irish mobs had come and gone, though the Bradenoys still had left some power of their own, but they were not an independent folk by that year. They were a part of larger things; it is as true in the world of the mobs as it is in every other world, that the small and independent tradesman is a relic of past ages.

But, though Cam was content to live as a small bit of a large trade in most respects, in respect of Edbhinne Wendover he needed still to be a king, and rule. And his great misfortune was that Edbhinne had chanced to see Neilan Ocharan when she had been a lass of fifteen, and had not much cared after that to meet any other man on the rapid face of the earth.

It was not that she had no other friends, nor others she felt fondly for; she had many, boys and girls, and then men and women. People of the neighborhood, they were, and people of the schools she worked her bright way through, and of them all, Cam was as close as any despite the thirteen years of age that came between him and the lovely Edbhinne. Cam's dark-browed handsomeness, and he was a handsome man in his own fierce way, attracted her and interested her. The brick-red curls and elfin face and figure of Shelagh Delaney attracted her as well, and interested her, for she had an artist's eye, and she herself wore her hair long and deep gold and almost straight, and carried herself too tall and too well to be elfin at all. And she treated Cam as she treated Shelagh, with open joy and clear friendship, and pleasure in the interests they shared, and in those she did not share, that were for that reason curious and mysterious to her.

And she treated Cam in no other way, and this was the great misfortune he lamented in his fierce, dark heart; for she felt she had been shaped by God for Neilan, and he for her, from before the birth of all things. She made no great cry of it, nor fashioned poetry nor any sort of wind about it, that not being her way; but

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

so she felt, and she could not imagine or remember having felt any other way, at any moment of her life.

And Neilan felt the same. Such things are more common than many folk believe; whoever first dreamed that men and women were originally one and were terribly split apart, and search to this day, each of them, for his other part or her other part, dreamed such a thing because he had seen such a thing himself—or what is likelier, lived it. And the dream has stayed a taste on the lips of thousands of folk, over thousands of years, because those thousands saw such a thing—or, likelier, lived it.

In September of that year 1950, Cam Bradenoy accomplished a brave and difficult act. He began it at the door of a shop, at five of an afternoon, just as Edbhinne opened it and came out into the chancy sunlight of that day and brightened it by her coming.

The shop, where she served as sales clerk and general prentice, was named for her family: Wendover Jewels, on Windsor Place, near, if not too near, the island's eastern shore. There was a brave show always in its window, if no great sums tied up in its stock, which was for the most part simple: gold and silver rings, pins, trinkets of all sorts, with a few stones to focus the light—tourmalines and the like, and opals at the highest edge of the shop's prices; Edbhinne was even more fond of those shading, shifting stones than her father was, who had begun Wendover Jewels in that shop fifteen years before his daughter's birth.

Cam had been waiting for her and had tried not to make it too clear to any passersby that he was waiting. As the shop door shut behind her with its little bell, he walked forward to meet her, smiling and lifting one big flat hand in greeting. Edbhinne smiled back, brightening the day a bit further, and said: "It's an odd place and time to see you, Cam."

"Not so bloody odd," Cam said, and smiled at her. For a dark man he had a very bright smile. "I do a deal of walking, you know. There are times I walk down here, and by the shore."

"Well, it's fine to see you," Edbhinne said, and meant it too. "Walk me to the druggist, I must pick up some aspirins."

Cam shook his head. "Now, Edbhinne, don't tell me a girl as happy as you seem suffers with the headache?"

"It's not for me," she said. "My Da's the sufferer. He gets terrible ones sometimes, he worries too much, you know."

"He's always been a worrier," Cam agreed, and they fell into step together going down Windsor Place to the western corner. The entire street is but four blocks in extent. Cam wanted to take the hand of Edbhinne, but felt he didn't like the chance that she might refuse him that, or draw away a bit. There was a little silence as they walked, more uncomfortable to Cam than to Edbhinne, so then it was Cam who broke it. "By the way, Edbhinne,"

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

he said, and made himself sound near as casual as he wished to sound, "are you planning anything special this Friday night?"

"Special?" Edbhinne said. "Not that I know of," she said after a bare second. They crossed the street—a tiny street, it is, and no great traffic on it even at five or five-ten of a weekday afternoon—and Edbhinne walked a bit ahead, toward the druggist's in mid block.

Cam went into the shop a few steps behind her, and she was already at the counter with an aspirin bottle, her hand in a pocket of her skirt finding cash. As she put a bill on the counter and watched little Carlo Marinaro, in his white jacket, take it, Cam said: "I thought we might see a film, if you'd like that. Or anything at all you'd like, Edbhinne."

She took her change, put it with the aspirin bottle in her pocket, and turned quick to look at him standing there. "Now why would you make such an offer to me, Cam Bradenoy? What's truly on your mind?"

Cam shook his dark head. "Nothing but a film," he said. "Or what you'd like—I thought only it would be a pleasant evening for it, Friday. End of the week, and all."

He felt he was sounding Edbhinne's young age instead of his own, and could not full control himself. But she seemed to notice nothing odd in his manner; she only smiled at him, walking out of the shop, and he followed her a couple of steps behind and matched her on the street again.

"In that case, I'd be happy to go with you," she said. "But not to a war film, Cam, you know that."

"There's a Cary Grant at the Fortway," he said. "I wouldn't take you to see a war film, Edbhinne, I know how you feel. It'll all be peaceful, you know. Just a film, and nothing more. Just over in Brooklyn, you know. We can take the ferry over, it might be a nice night for it. Right across there to Brooklyn." He had to shut his teeth on fifty words more, and had no notion what they might have been; he felt himself babbling like a teener fool. But she was still smiling toward him, and he felt he had passed a test, whether with her or with himself he could not have said. "I'll come by for you at seven-thirty," he said.

"Seven-thirty," Edbhinne said, and: "I'll be going home now, Cam. Thank you for asking me."

He said: "My pleasure," as she turned and walked off. He stood there in mid street, hearing himself breathe for quite a few seconds before he went on himself.

It was no later than that evening she called Neilan.

Nothing unusual there, nothing at all; the day she did not speak to Neilan Ocharan would be the unusual day. Most evenings, they saw each other a bit, talked, perhaps kissed a little but nothing

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

more than that. The evenings they did not meet, still they spoke.

And, of course, they spoke of very little except themselves, and were scarce conscious of that. The way of it for Edbhinne, and for Neilan as well, was that a day was not complete without the sound of that other voice, and the chance to display for the other the self the day had changed and made.

And that evening, after some chat of this sort, Edbhinne said: "You'll never guess who's asked me to a film Friday."

Neilan said at once: "Cam Bradenoy. He *would* do such a thing, love."

Edbhinne laughed. It was a lovely sound, and suited her looks very well. "Not only that," she said, "I told him I'd go with him." She was quite unprepared for Neilan's indrawn breath, a hiss that sounded half anger and half fear.

"And why would you do that?" he said.

"He seemed so desperate," Edbhinne said. "The poor fellow. I thought a film would do me no harm, and I'm sure Cam Bradenoy will not."

"Are you, then?" said Neilan, after a second.

"I am," she told him. "Tell me how you guessed his name, dear. I never thought you would."

Neilan chuckled, but it was a grim sound. "It was easy enough," he said into the telephone. "Have I not seen the man look after you every time you appear on a street?"

Edbhinne laughed again, and her laugh was the same, as full of sunlight as the girl herself. "Does he really?" she said. "I don't notice him all that close, you know."

Neilan sighed into the telephone. "Now, how could you not?" he said. "The big, dark fellow—Edbhinne, I am not all that sure the man's as harmless as you think."

"Of course he is," Edbhinne said easily. "I'd know, did he mean harm to me. I don't think he means harm to any person at all."

"Edbhinne," Neilan said carefully, "I don't like this at all, you know."

"Neilan, love," Edbhinne said, "there is nothing in it to dislike. I'll see a film, and I'll enjoy it, and I'll come to no harm in the world."

And Neilan had no reason for his worry but the thought of Cam himself, and that scarce reason enough to excuse insistence. "I'll hope for it, then," he said, and Edbhinne laughed over the wire. It was copper wire then and not the glass stuff they have now.

"If there was any trouble to it," Edbhinne told him happily, "I'd know, love. I swear to you there is none."

And they talked awhile more, just for the pleasure of hearing their voices twine with each other. And ended the talk at last feeling sated and nerved at once, each for the other, as young lovers will, even do they share no more than a kiss now and again in season.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

And Friday came round, as it does, and Edbhinne went with Cam Bradenoy to her Cary Grant film, and I will not say that she had nothing to do to keep him in order, for his hand was at the seat back and round her shoulders a few times. But that was the whole extent of it, to the end of the film and the leaving for the open night air, and the air feeling as fresh and new and strange as it does if you walk out of a film palace into it, and the ordinary sights as bright and the sounds as loud. It's as if the world's been created as the film's been created—and so it has, in every second—but larger and better, which is the truth of it anyhow.

The young folk of that time would go from a film to a shop for ice cream and the fair chatter of the young, and so they did, and as they walked toward the shop, Cam broke out of a sudden: "Edbhinne, I want you to be seeing me."

Her laugh was soft in the street, and warm in it. "I am seeing you, Cam Bradenoy. You're striding beside me, of course I am seeing you."

"Play me no games, darling," he said, as they turned toward the bright shop with the noise of talk held tight inside it. "I want to be seeing you as a regular thing. Walking out with you, dear lass."

And still she laughed, and was laughing as they found a small booth at the back of the shop and slid into seats facing each other across the small table that looked like marble, if you had never seen marble. Shining and damp the table was, for they that ran the shop were busy and cleanly folk. "Walking out," Edbhinne said when she'd used up her laughter on it a bit. "Cam, I'm not the sort walks out with a boy, and you must know it."

"And not with Neilan?" he said, and leaned with his elbows on the table, fierce at her.

"With Neilan," Edbhinne said, and nodded. "I will admit that, since the world knows it, and since who knows it I do not mind for at all."

"Then, Edbhinne—"

"But with my Neilan," she said. "Not with any boy else. As you must also know, Cam."

Now, "my Neilan" maddened Cam Bradenoy. He knew, and there was no surprise, and yet it maddened him. "You're a girl," he said, all of a sudden. "You'll change, and see if you do not."

"Cam," Edbhinne said, and the voice was a caress, and what it touched in the air was Neilan Ocharan, distant and unknowing, and no one else; and Edbhinne knew it well, and so did Cam Bradenoy. "Cam, I will not change, and have never changed at all, and that is one more thing you know."

Now, through all this talk the young man in his white had come and asked them for their wants, and written orders down, and returned with the small joys of that shop, and through all this talk the two were spooning up their ices, Edbhinne with greater pleasure than Cam could find for it, since ice cream is a different

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

thing as it comes to you at eighteen or at thirty-one. I see no reason to bother you with all of that.

"You will change," Cam Bradenoy said. "And it's I will change you." Now, at that minute he had not yet the dark plan in his mind, nor any part of it; he spoke out of his future, without knowing what that future was to be.

"Cam," Edbhinne said once more, but this time her voice was quick and hard. "Look at me some other way. The look you've put on is a fright to me."

"I'll change my look," said Cam Bradenoy, "if you will change your way, and, for a little, walk out with me. I'll show you how I can be to you, Edbhinne."

Gently enough, for she thought to gentle him out of his look, she said: "It cannot be, Cam. It cannot be."

"Give me the chance," he said. "I deserve the chance, Edbhinne."

She shook her head, still gentle. And in her voice was that caress of Neilan Ocharan, when she said to Cam Bradenoy: "There is no chance, no chance in all this world. As long as I live, as long as he lives, there is no chance, Cam."

And so she sealed his doom, and sealed her own. And Cam's as well.

For what she had said lived in the dark mind of Cam Bradenoy and would not die there. For he was always one of the mob folk, and they have minds of their own sort, and not like the minds of the rest of the world.

As I've told you, all that happened on a Friday night in the cool September of the year of 1950. And it was on the Monday night following that Neilan Ocharan was taken off the streets of Manhattan, where he and his partner Basil Theodicopolous patrolled in the auto there, and seen no more alive. All that anyone knew on that night was that they had stopped in a dark street because a woman had hailed at them, and she looking much troubled, and her clothes ripped and torn. Basil had been the driver and he stayed with the auto, but it did him no good; he was hit on the head by a man darting across the street at him while Neilan was out of the auto and walking to the woman.

I understand that they do it differently now, in the autos, and it is now that both stay in the car when they inquire for a trouble; but it wasn't so then, and Neilan Ocharan stepped out to give what aid he might, and was not seen again in this life. Basil woke sore bruised, at a later time, and called in to his station and did what he could, but nothing that was done was an aid to his partner.

The police did their tracing and their searching, but there was no result to it. The troubled woman vanished like a dream, and if she was seen again she was not recognized for the same. There

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

was talk at the time that Neilan had run foul of gamblers, because he had kicked over a nest of them in his work awhile before that night; but no one knew the truth of it but a very few, and they not speaking of it then or now.

But I'll tell you how it was. It was Cam Bradenoy had hold of Neilan, and to snatch him so out of the street he had used the mob folk he knew. A favor between friends, they called it, the few that were part of what happened, and doubtless Cam paid back his friends with other favors, as the years went. It's favors run that world, as they understand it, and it is not much they do understand, not Cam nor any in that world—for Cam had taken Neilan to tell him what he was to do, and he understood so little he thought with all his mind that there was a chance Neilan would do it, too.

"You'll leave her," Cam said. For he had thought of nothing else since the Friday, and he was hot with it, and nothing else mattered to him but the girl.

Neilan laughed at him. Sitting on a wood chair with his hands bound behind, Neilan laughed, because, even knowing the fierce man, it was a joke he thought he was in. "Is that what you're about here, Bradenoy?" he said, and he laughed again.

"It is," Cam said, dark-browed and stern. They were alone in a room, you understand, and a room in Manhattan. It had no windows, for it was a long flight of stone steps under the pavement, at the bottom of a puny-looking brick building by the Manhattan waterfront. It was on the west side of that island, and the very building itself is gone now, but that's no matter.

"You've got me here by force and fraud, and you're to talk of my Edbhinne?" Neilan said. And still he could not believe in the serious nature of the thing. "Bradenoy, it's madness has overtaken you."

"You'll leave her," Cam Bradenoy said. "You will do it, Ocharan. I tell you, you will do it."

Now, it came clear to Neilan that it was not a joke he was in; and yet he laughed again. "And I tell you, lad Bradenoy, I will not. I'd as soon leave my arms and legs as leave my love, and sooner. And what's come to you, that she should be left to yourself?"

Cam Bradenoy sat on the edge of a table that was in the room. There were three chairs and a wood table in that room, and what they were for I cannot tell you, and it is no matter, but they were there. "I have loved her long," he said to the man bound in his chair. "I'll have her, and you will walk out of her life."

Neilan was still laughing. "Why, I've said I'd leave my arms and legs first," he said, "and how then will I walk away from her without my legs? Bradenoy, you're mired in nonsense, this is stuff for the schoolyard and eight years old. This is not for grown men."

"This is life and death for me," said Cam Bradenoy. "Do you think you've been taken here for some light thing?"

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Nothing of the kind," Neilan said. "You'll have paid Franco and those a fair sum for it, one way or another, and it's not payment you'd make lightly. But it is schoolyard stuff, Bradenoy, it is nonsense. Do you wish her, then ask her, ask herself."

Bradenoy rose from the table. He hit his flat right hand with the fist of the other. "Have I not asked her?" he said. "And do you not know what she said to me? I spoke to her gently as any man can speak, and do you not know what she said to me?"

"She said she was mine, and I hers," Neilan said easily. "That being the way of it, Bradenoy. And I tell you, there is nothing to be done for it; it is so. It will stay so."

Bradenoy hit his palm again with his own fist. "You will leave her," he said. "She'll be sad for it, and I will comfort, and that will be the way of it."

"Dreaming," Neilan said, and laughed again. "Lad Bradenoy, you're dreaming."

And Bradenoy walked to Neilan where he sat bound, and towered over him, and both his hands in fists, and his voice was tense with his need. "It's of her I dream," he said. "Of Edbhinne herself, and that's my dream. And I will have it, with you or without you."

"Not with me," Neilan said. "I promise you that, Bradenoy. And how will you, without me?" For he did not yet imagine.

"You'll leave her," Cam Bradenoy said. "You've the choice, do you leave her and live your life, or leave her, and leave all with it."

And Neilan stared at him. "Do you mean you'll kill me, Bradenoy? Do you mean that, here and now?" And his laughter was gone, and his mouth dry, for he knew.

"I'll have you out of her life, to give a better man his honest chance," Bradenoy said, and he had gone very calm. "And how you accomplish that, it is your choice."

Now, Neilan knew his fate, in the eyes of the dark-browed Cam Bradenoy. And he knew well that the fate need not be his, but that he could elude it, and that simply. I'll say to his credit, or his shame, that even in his mind he never wavered, though he took a precious pair of minutes' silence before he gave answer. He was fond of his life, Neilan Ocharan, and he had liked the living of it, and he liked well the sitting in his wood chair, and breathing in and out, for that two minutes of silent time.

And then he nodded, not to the man who stood before him but to the fate he could vision, and he said: "What's to be will be, Bradenoy. It will gain nothing for you, and I think somehow you know that. You'll not do this for the gain of it, and if you've a grain of humanity in you, you'll not do it at all. But I'd give my arms and legs before I would leave my dear Edbhinne, my love, and if the need be, I will give my life, and glad of the choice."

Did Bradenoy think it all out again in that second, I cannot say.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

But he had a ready gun by him, for he had known without thought that he might have need of the gun; and, need or no, he used it. And he left the dead man in that windowless small room, and made his arrangements, and where you'd put up a stone over the body of Neilan Ocharan I also cannot tell you. But it is some hid place, for the building's gone now, and the body never found.

I'll not trouble you with the tale of the mourning of Edbhinne Wendover, though it was long and full of pain. I'll say only that Cam Bradenoy had the wit to bide for weeks, and for months, before he said a word to the girl more meaningful than a quiet greeting on the street. And then he asked her, and it was evening once again, and cold winter—and on the island the winters are cold indeed, and the wind tears through you with little in the way of city or forest to break its path—would she meet him the next night for a talk. And only a quiet talk, he said to her. It was in her father's shop they met, with the Christmas sales over and done and the tinsel decorations gone the week before, and none in the shop but themselves, and her father quiet in the back, a shut door between. He was to die a year later; he had the high blood, and so had come his worries and his headaches. But his story's another story, and not this one I'm telling you.

Edbhinne herself was full of beauty, as always she would be. But the beauty had great sorrow in it now, and the sorrow cast a quiet over her, look and motion alike. "Cam, I would not," she said. "For Neilan would not like it, you know."

Bradenoy took that calmly enough. "Neilan's gone, darling," he said. "Like it or leave it, we cannot change it, and he's gone now. You must have your life."

"Oh, I have it," Edbhinne said. "And I will live it; he would have it so, Cam. Wherever he is, and whatever it is that took him from me, he would have me live my life."

"Then live it with some pleasures," he said, urging her but gently, having the wit for that.

"I'll have my pleasures," Edbhinne said, and she spoke as if she knew the future of herself. And it may be that she knew of her future what was important for her to know; it may be that we all know that, when we are quiet enough to listen for it and to hear it. But only a great event can quiet us so far as that; and in this world a many of the great events are those of sorrow. "I'll have my pleasures," Edbhinne said, "and they will fill my life, and I will live. For Neilan would have it so, Cam, and I'll be a good wife to him, and follow his wish."

Now, Bradenoy stared at the girl, his eyes wide. "A good wife, Edbhinne?" he said. "That's madness. It's only madness, and the madness will pass."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Edbhinne smiled still, though her laughter was very seldom heard. She smiled on Cam Bradenoy then, and it seemed to him his heart would break at the sight of her. No—it seemed to him he'd found a heart, that he never knew he owned, and found it as it broke.

"It is not madness, Cam," she said, and the same tone was in her voice, as if she knew the life she'd have, and was content for it. "It is my sanity. For I'm his, you know, and a small thing like death—and he is dead, Cam, there's nothing else possible—a small thing cannot change it. I'm his, and I have no mind for who hears it or knows it, and I will do as he wishes." And she smiled again into his staring face. "I lived to be his wife, Cam, and I will live so till I die myself. I'm pledged to my Neilan, Cam, and pledged I'll stay."

And it was beyond him to stop himself, and he burst out with it: "May God damn it, Edbhinne, but I shot the man, and he's gone."

Her smile was lovely, and it never changed. "I know you did, Cam," she said, and her voice was gentle. "There's nothing to show, and none can prove it, but I know you did. He said you meant me harm, and I could not believe you did; but I know better now." She looked up into his dark eyes with her own, and she spoke calmly. "I'll not mistake you twice, Cam. And I'll heed my Neilan, for I am his. I'm pledged to him, and promised to him; did you think that you could change it?"

Now, Cam Bradenoy put away his heartbreak, and forgot it, for that is the way of such folk. And he worked with his mob folk, and exchanged their favors. He had two children by some woman or other that he married, but what became of them I've no notion.

And Neilan's fate you know, and of Edbhinne's father I've already told all that needs for this tale.

And Edbhinne herself lived her life for twenty years, and married in the year of 1970, a woman of thirty-eight as she was, and the most beautiful woman on Staten Island, as all knew who'd seen her. There were those who wondered why she'd waited, and those who wondered why she'd married, and to all she gave the same reply.

"It's not my way to be alone any longer," she said. "My dear Jack understands me, and he knows my mind and heart. He'll be a husband to me and a fine one, and I a wife to him as fine as any wife can be. He'll run the shop with me; he's a lovely eye for opals, and he's a friendly man for all who come to look or buy. We'll raise a son, if God will have it so, and his name will be Jack, and he will grow, and learn, and live. That is the way of it, and that is my life." And she smiled again. "I have known Jack five years now," she said, "and he has known me, and it's a long while. And—Neilan would have it so, you know. We both know that: that Neilan would have it so."

Omnia vincit amor; and it may be that it does. ●

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Art by Allen Davis

TRIANGLE

by Jeffery Deaver

"Maybe I'll go to Baltimore."

"You mean . . ." She looked at him. "To see . . ."

"Doug," he answered.

"Really?" Mo Anderson asked and looked carefully at her fingernails, which she was painting bright red. He didn't like the color but he didn't say anything about it. She wouldn't listen to him anyway.

"I think it'd be fun," he continued.

"Oh, it would be," she said quickly. "Doug's a fun guy."

"Sure is," Pete Anderson said. He sat across from Mo on the front porch of their split-level house in suburban Westchester County. The month was June and the air was thick with the smell of the jasmine that Mo had planted earlier in the spring. Pete used to like that smell. Now, though, it made him sick to his stomach.

Mo inspected her nails for streaks and pretended to be sort of bored with the idea of him going to see her friend Doug. But she was a lousy actor; Pete could tell she was really excited by the idea and he knew why. But he just watched the lightning bugs

©1999 by Jeffery Deaver

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

and kept quiet. Unlike Mo, he *could* act.

"When would you go?" she asked.

"This weekend, I guess. Saturday."

They were silent and sipped their drinks, the ice clunking dully on the plastic glasses. It was the first day of summer and the sky wasn't completely dark yet even though it was nearly nine o'clock in the evening. There must've been a thousand lightning bugs in their front yard.

"I know I kinda said I'd help you clean up the garage," he said, wincing a little, looking guilty.

"No, I think you should go. I think it'd be a good idea," she said.

I *know* you think it'd be a good idea, Pete thought. But he didn't say this to her. Lately he'd been thinking a lot of things and not saying them.

Pete was sweating—more from excitement than from the heat—and he wiped the sweat off his face and his round buzz-cut blond hair with his napkin.

The phone rang and Mo went to answer it.

She came back and said, "It's your *father,*" in that sour voice of hers that Pete hated. She sat down and didn't say anything else, just picked up her drink and examined her nails again.

Pete got up and went into the kitchen. His father lived in Wisconsin, not far from Lake Michigan. He loved the man and wished they lived closer together. Mo, though, didn't like him one bit and always raised a stink when Pete wanted to go visit. She never went with him. Pete was never exactly sure what the problem was between Mo and his dad. But it made him mad that she treated the man so badly and would never talk to Pete about it.

And he was mad, too, that Mo seemed to put Pete in the middle of things. Sometimes Pete even felt guilty he *had* a father.

He had a nice talk but hung up after only ten minutes because he felt Mo didn't want him to be on the phone.

Pete walked out onto the porch.

"Saturday," Mo said. "I think Saturday'd be fine."

Fine . . .

Then she looked at her watch and said, "It's getting late. Time for bed."

An author who never fails to surprise, Jeffery Deaver worked as an attorney and a composer of folk music prior to turning his attention to fiction-writing. If you think this latest story is the stunner we've pegged it for, you may want to look for the author's upcoming novel *The Devil's Teardrop,* due to be published by Simon & Schuster in 1999.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

And when Mo said it was time for bed, it was definitely time for bed.

Later that night, when Mo was asleep, Pete walked downstairs into the office. He reached behind a row of books resting on the built-in bookshelves and pulled out a large, sealed envelope.

He carried it down to his workshop in the basement. He opened the envelope and took out a book. It was called *Triangle* and Pete had found it in the true-crime section of a local used-book shop after flipping through nearly twenty books about real-life murders. Pete had never ripped off anything, but that day he'd looked around the store and slipped the book inside his windbreaker, then strolled casually out the door. He'd *had* to steal it; he was afraid that—if everything went as he'd planned—the clerk might remember him buying the book and the police would use it as evidence.

Triangle was the story of a couple in Colorado Springs. The wife was married to a man named Roy. But she was also seeing another man—Hank—a local carpenter. Roy found out and waited until Hank was out hiking on a mountain path, then he snuck up beside him and pushed him over the cliff. Hank grabbed onto a tree root but he lost his grip—or Roy smashed his hands; it wasn't clear—and Hank fell a hundred feet to his death on the rocks in the valley. Roy went back home and had a drink with his wife just to watch her reaction when the call came that Hank was dead.

Pete didn't know squat about crimes. All he knew was what he'd seen on TV and in the movies. None of the criminals in those shows seemed very smart and they were always getting caught by the good guys, even though *they* didn't really seem much smarter than the bad guys. But that crime in Colorado was a smart crime. Because there were no murder weapons and very few clues. The only reason Roy got caught was that he'd forgotten to look for witnesses.

If the killer had only taken the time to look around him, he would have seen the witnesses: A couple of campers had a perfect view of Hank Gibson plummeting to his bloody death, screaming as he fell, and of Roy standing on the cliff, watching him. . . .

Triangle became Pete's bible. He read it cover to cover—to see how Roy had planned the crime and to find out how the police had investigated it.

Tonight, with Mo asleep and his electronic airline ticket to Baltimore bought and paid for, Pete read *Triangle* once again, paying particular attention to the parts he'd underlined. Then he walked back upstairs, packed the book in the bottom of his suitcase, and

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

lay on the couch in the office, looking out the window at the hazy summer stars and thinking about his trip from every angle.

Because he wanted to make sure he got away with the crime. He didn't want to go to jail for life—like Roy.

Oh, sure there were risks. Pete knew that. But nothing was going to stop him.

Doug had to die.

Pete realized he'd been thinking about the idea, in the back of his mind, for months, not long after Mo met Doug.

She worked part-time for a drug company in Westchester—the same company Doug was a salesman for, assigned to the Baltimore office. They met when he came to the headquarters for a sales conference. Mo had told Pete that she was having dinner with "somebody" from the company, but she didn't say who. Pete didn't think anything of it until he overheard her tell one of her girlfriends on the phone about this interesting guy she'd met. But then she realized Pete was standing near enough to hear and she changed the subject.

Over the next few months, Pete realized that Mo was getting more and more distracted, paying less and less attention to him. And he heard her mention Doug more and more.

One night Pete asked her about him.

"Oh, Doug?" she said, sounding irritated. "Why, he's just a friend, that's all. Can't I have friends? Aren't I allowed?"

Pete noticed that Mo was starting to spend a lot of time on the phone and on-line. He tried to check the phone bills to see if she was calling Baltimore but she hid them or threw them out. He also tried to read her e-mails but found she'd changed her password. Pete was an expert with computers and easily broke into her account. But when he went to read her e-mails he found she'd deleted them all.

He was so furious he nearly smashed the computer.

Then, to Pete's dismay, Mo started inviting Doug to dinner at their house when he was in Westchester on company business. He was older than Mo and sort of heavy. But Pete admitted he was handsome and real slick. Those dinners were the worst. . . . They'd all three sit at the dinner table and Doug would try to charm Pete and ask him about computers and sports and the things that Mo obviously had told Doug that Pete liked. But it was real awkward and you could tell he didn't give a damn about Pete. He just wanted to be there with Mo, alone.

By then Pete was checking up on Mo all the time. Sometimes he'd pretend to go to a game with Sammy Biltmore or Tony Hale but he'd come home early and find that she was gone too. Then she'd come home at eight or nine and look all flustered, not expecting to find him, and she'd say she'd been working late, even

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

though she was just an office manager and hardly ever worked later than five before she met Doug. Once, when she claimed she was at the office, Pete got Doug's number in Baltimore and the message said he'd be out of town for a couple of days.

Everything was changing. Mo and Pete would have dinner together but it wasn't the same. They didn't have picnics and they didn't take walks in the evenings. And they hardly ever sat together on the porch anymore and looked out at the fireflies and made plans for trips they wanted to take.

"I don't like him," Pete said. "Doug, I mean."

"Oh, quit being so jealous. He's a good friend, that's all. He likes both of us."

"No, he doesn't like me."

"Of course he does. You don't have to worry."

But Pete did worry, and he worried even more when he found a piece of paper in her purse last month. It said: *D.G.—Sunday, motel 2 P.M.*

Doug's last name was Grant.

That Sunday morning Pete tried not to react when Mo said, "I'm going out for a while, honey."

"Where you going?"

"Shopping. I'll be back by five."

He thought about asking her exactly where she was going but he didn't think that was a good idea. It might make her suspicious. So he said cheerfully, "Okay, see you later."

As soon as her car had pulled out of the driveway he'd started calling motels in the area and asking for Douglas Grant.

The clerk at the Westchester Motor Inn said, "One minute, please, I'll connect you."

Pete hung up fast.

He was at the motel in fifteen minutes and, yep, there was Mo's car parked in front of one of the doors. Pete snuck up close to the room. The shade was drawn and the lights were out, but the window was partly open. Pete could hear bits of the conversation.

"I don't like that."

"That . . . ?" she asked.

"That color. I want you to paint your nails red. It's sexy. I don't like that color you're wearing. What is it?"

"Peach."

"I like bright red," Doug said.

"Well, okay."

There was some laughing. Then a long silence. Pete tried to look inside but he couldn't see anything. Finally, Mo said, "We have to talk. About Pete."

"He knows something," Doug was saying. "I know he does."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"He's been like a damn spy lately," she said, with that edge to her voice that Pete hated. "Sometimes I'd like to strangle him."

Pete closed his eyes when he heard Mo say this. Pressed the lids closed so hard he thought he might never open them again.

He heard the sound of a beer can opening.

Doug said, "So what if he finds out?"

"So *what?* I told you what having an affair does to alimony in this state. It *eliminates* it. We have to be careful. I've got a lifestyle I'm accustomed to."

"Then what should we do?" Doug asked.

"I've been thinking about it. I think you should do something with him."

"Do something with him?" Doug had an edge to his voice too. "Get him a one-way ticket . . ."

"Come on."

"Okay, sorry. But what do you mean by 'do something' ?"

"Get to know him."

"You're kidding."

"Prove to him you're just a friend."

Doug laughed and said in a soft, low voice, "Does *that* feel like a friend?"

She laughed too. "Stop it. I'm trying to have a serious talk here."

"So, what? We go to a ball game together?"

"No, it's got to be more than that. Ask him to come visit you."

"Oh, that'd be fun." With that same snotty tone that Mo sometimes used.

She continued, "No, I like it. Ask him to come down. Pretend you've got a girlfriend or something."

"He won't believe that."

"Pete's only smart when it comes to computers and baseball. He's stupid about everything else."

Peter wrung his hands together. Nearly sprained a thumb—like the time he jammed his finger on the basketball court.

"That means I have to pretend I like him."

"Yeah, that's *exactly* what it means. It's not going to kill you."

"You come with him."

"No," she said. "I couldn't keep my hands off you."

A pause. Then Doug said, "Oh, hell, all right. I'll do it."

Pete, crouching on a strip of yellow grass beside three discarded soda cans, curled into a ball and shook with fury. It took all his willpower not to scream.

He hurried home, threw himself down on the couch in the office, and turned on the game.

When Mo came home—which wasn't at five at all, like she promised, but at six-thirty—he pretended he'd fallen asleep.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

That night he decided what he had to do and the next day he went to the used-book store and stole the copy of *Triangle.*

On Saturday Mo drove him to the airport.

"You two gonna have fun together?" In the car she lit a cigarette. She'd never smoked before she met Doug.

"You bet," Pete said. He sounded cheerful because he was cheerful. "We're gonna have a fine time."

On the day of the murder, while his wife and her lover were sipping wine in a room at the Mountain View Lodge, Roy had lunch with a business associate. The man, who wished to remain anonymous, reported that Roy was in unusually good spirits. It seemed his depression had lifted and he was happy once more.

Fine, fine, fine . . .

At the gate Mo kissed him and then hugged him hard. He didn't kiss her but he hugged her back. But not hard. He didn't want to touch her. Didn't want to be touched by her.

"You're looking forward to going, aren't you?" she asked.

"I sure am," he answered. This was true.

"I love you," she said.

"I love you, too," he responded. This was not true. He hated her. He hoped the plane left on time. He didn't want to wait here with her any longer than he had to.

But the flight left as scheduled.

The flight attendant, a pretty blond woman, kept stopping at his seat. This wasn't unusual for Pete. Women liked him. He'd heard a million times that he was cute. Women were always leaning close and telling him that. Touching his arm, squeezing his shoulder. But today he answered her questions with a simple "yes" or "no." And kept reading *Triangle.* Reading the passages he'd underlined. Memorizing them.

Learning about fingerprints, about interviewing witnesses, about footprints and trace evidence. There was a lot he didn't understand, but he did figure out how smart the cops were and that he'd have to be very careful if he was going to kill Doug.

"We're about to land," the flight attendant said, "could you put your seat belt on, please?"

She squeezed his shoulder and smiled at him.

He put the seat belt on and went back to his book.

Hank Gibson's body had fallen one hundred and twelve feet. He'd landed on his right side and of the more than two hundred bones in the human body, he'd broken seventy-seven of them. His ribs had pierced all his major internal organs and his skull was flattened on one side.

"Welcome to Baltimore, where the local time is twelve twenty-five," the flight attendant said. "Please remain in your seat with

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

the seat belt fastened until the plane has come to a complete stop and the pilot has turned off the Fasten Seat Belt sign. Thank you."

The medical examiner estimated that Hank was traveling eighty miles an hour when he struck the ground and that death was virtually instantaneous.

Welcome to Baltimore . . .

Doug met him at the airport. Shook his hand.

"How you doing, buddy?" Doug asked.

"Okay."

This was so weird. Spending the weekend with a man that Mo knew so well and that Pete hardly knew at all.

Going hiking with somebody he hardly knew at all.

Going to kill somebody he hardly knew at all. . . .

He walked along beside Doug.

"I need a beer and some crabs," Doug said as they got into his car. "You hungry?"

"Sure am."

They stopped at the waterfront and went into an old dive. The place stunk. It smelled like the cleanser Mo used on the floor when Randolf, their Labrador retriever puppy, made a mess on the carpet.

Doug whistled at the waitress before they'd even sat down. "Hey, honey, think you can handle two real men?" He gave her the sort of grin Pete'd seen Doug give Mo a couple of times. Pete looked away, somewhat embarrassed but plenty disgusted.

When they started to eat Doug calmed down, though that was more likely the beers. Like Mo got after her third glass of Gallo in the evenings. Doug had at least three that Pete counted and maybe a couple more after them.

Pete wasn't saying much. Doug tried to be cheerful. He talked and talked but it was just garbage. Pete didn't pay any attention.

"Maybe I'll give my girlfriend a call," Doug said suddenly. "See if she wants to join us."

"You have a girlfriend? What's her name?"

"Uhm, Cathy," he said.

The waitress's nametag said: *Hi. I'm Cathleen.*

"That'd be fun," Pete said.

"She might be going out of town this weekend." He avoided Pete's eyes. "But I'll call her later."

Pete's only smart when it comes to computers and baseball. He's stupid about everything else.

Finally Doug looked at his watch and said, "So what do you feel like doing now?"

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Pete pretended to think for a minute and asked, "Anyplace we can go hiking around here?"

"Hiking?"

"Like any mountain trails?"

Doug finished his beer, shook his head. "Naw, nothing like that I know of."

Pete felt rage again—his hands were shaking, the blood roaring in his ears—but he covered it up pretty well and tried to think. Now, what was he going to do? He'd counted on Doug agreeing to whatever he wanted. He'd counted on a nice high cliff.

But then Doug continued. "But if you want to be outside, one thing we could do, maybe, is go hunting."

"Hunting?"

"Nothing good's in season now," Doug said. "But there's always rabbits and squirrels."

"Well—"

"I've got a couple of guns we can use."

Guns?

Pete said, "Okay. Let's go hunting."

"You shoot much?" Doug asked him.

"Some."

In fact, Pete was a good shot. His father had taught him how to load and clean guns and how to handle them. ("Never point it at anything unless you're prepared to shoot it.")

But Pete didn't want Doug to know he knew anything about guns so he let the man show him how to load the little .22 and how to pull the slide to cock it and where the safety was.

I'm a *much* better actor than Mo.

They were in Doug's house, which was pretty nice. It was in the woods and it was a big house, all full of stone walls and glass. The furniture wasn't like the cheap things Mo and Pete had. It was mostly antiques.

Which depressed Pete even more, made him angrier, because he knew that Mo liked money and she liked *people* who had money even if they were idiots, like Doug. When Pete looked at Doug's beautiful house he knew that if Mo ever saw it then she'd want Doug even more. Then he wondered if she *had* seen it. Pete had gone to Wisconsin a few months ago. Maybe Mo had come down here to spend the night with Doug.

"So," Doug said. "Ready?"

"Where're we going?" Pete asked.

"There's a good field about a mile from here. It's not posted. Anything we can hit we can take."

"Sounds good to me," Pete said.

They got into the car and Doug pulled onto the road.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Better put that seat belt on," Doug warned. "I drive like a crazy man."

The field looked familiar to Pete.

As Doug laced up his boots, Pete realized why it was familiar. It was almost identical to a field in White Plains—the one across the highway from the elementary school. The only difference was that this one was completely quiet; the New York field was noisy. You heard a continual stream of traffic.

Pete was looking around.

Not a soul.

"What?" Doug asked, and Pete realized that the man was staring at him.

"Pretty quiet."

And deserted. No witnesses.

"Nobody knows about this place. I found it by my little old lonesome." Doug said this real proud, as if he'd discovered a cure for cancer. "Lessee." He lifted his rifle and squeezed off a round.

Crack . . .

He missed a can sitting about thirty feet away.

"Little rusty," he said. "But, hey, aren't we having fun?"

"Sure are," Pete answered.

Doug fired again, three times, and hit the can on the last shot. It leapt into the air. "There we go!"

Doug reloaded and they started through the tall grass and brush.

They walked for five minutes.

"There," Doug said. "Can you hit that rock over there?"

He was pointing at a white rock about twenty feet from them. Pete thought he could have hit it but he missed on purpose. He emptied the clip.

"Not bad," Doug said. "Came close the last few shots." Pete knew he was being sarcastic.

"So, what? We go to a ball game together?"

"No, it's got to be more than that. Ask him to come visit you."

"Oh, that'd be fun."

Pete reloaded and they continued through the grass.

"So," Doug said. "How's she doing?"

"Fine. She's fine."

Whenever Mo was upset and Pete'd ask her how she was she'd say, "Fine. I'm fine."

Which didn't mean fine at all. It meant, I don't feel like telling you anything. I'm keeping secrets from you.

They stepped over a few fallen logs and started down a hill.

The grass was mixed with blue flowers and daisies. Mo liked to garden and was always driving up to the nursery to buy plants.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Sometimes she'd come back without any and Pete began to wonder if on those trips she was really seeing Doug instead. He got angry again. Hands sweaty, teeth grinding together.

"She get her car fixed?" Doug asked. "She was saying that there was something wrong with the transmission."

How'd he know that? The car broke down only four days ago. Had Doug been there and Pete didn't know it?

Doug glanced at Pete and repeated the question.

Pete blinked. "Oh, her car? Yeah, it's okay. She took it in and they fixed it."

But then he felt better because that meant they *hadn't* talked yesterday or she would have told him about getting the car fixed.

On the other hand, maybe Doug was lying to him now. Making it *look* as if she hadn't told him about the car when they really had talked.

Pete looked at Doug's pudgy face and couldn't decide whether to believe him or not. He looked sort of innocent but Pete had learned that people who seemed innocent were sometimes the most guilty. Roy, the husband in the *Triangle* book, had been a church choir director. From the smiling picture in the book, you'd never guess he'd kill a soul.

Thinking about the book, thinking about murder.

Pete was scanning the field. Yes, there . . . About fifty feet away. A fence. Five feet high. It would work just fine.

Fine.

As fine as Mo.

Who wanted Doug more than she wanted Pete.

"What're you looking for?" Doug asked.

"Something to shoot."

And he thought: Just witnesses. That's all I'm looking for.

"Let's go that way," Pete said and walked toward the fence.

Doug shrugged. "Sure. Why not?"

Pete studied it as they approached. Wood posts about eight feet apart, five strands of rusting wire.

Not too easy to climb over, but it wasn't barbed wire like some of the fences they'd passed. Besides, Pete didn't want it *too* easy to climb. He'd been thinking. He had a plan.

Roy had thought about the murder for weeks. It had obsessed his every waking moment. He'd drawn charts and diagrams and planned every detail down to the n'th degree. In his mind, at least, it was the perfect crime.

Pete now asked, "So what's your girlfriend do?"

"Uhm, my girlfriend? She works in Baltimore."

"Oh. Doing what?"

"In an office."

"Oh."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

They got closer to the fence. Pete asked, "You're divorced? Mo was saying you're divorced."

"Right. Betty and I split up two years ago."

"You still see her?"

"Who? Betty? Naw. We went our separate ways."

"You have any kids?"

"Nope."

Of course not. When you had kids you had to think about somebody else. You couldn't think about yourself all the time. Like Doug did. Like Mo. Pete was looking around again. For squirrels, for rabbits, for witnesses. Then Doug stopped and he looked around, too. Pete wondered why, but then Doug took a bottle of beer from his knapsack and drank the whole bottle down and tossed it on the ground. "You want something to drink?" Doug asked.

"No," Pete answered. It was good that Doug'd be slightly drunk when they found him. They'd check his blood. They did that. That's how they knew Hank'd been drinking when they got the body to the Colorado Springs hospital—they checked the alcohol in the blood.

The fence was only twenty feet away.

"Oh, hey," Pete said. "Over there. Look."

He pointed to the grass on the other side of the fence.

"What?" Doug asked.

"I saw a couple of rabbits."

"You did? Where?"

"I'll show you. Come on."

"Okay. Let's do it," Doug said.

They walked to the fence. Suddenly, Doug reached out and took Pete's rifle. "I'll hold it while you climb over. Safer that way."

Jesus . . . Pete froze with terror. Doug was going to do exactly what Pete had thought of. He'd been planning on holding Doug's gun for him. And then when Doug was at the top of the fence he was going to shoot him. Making it look like Doug had tried to carry his gun as he climbed the fence but he'd dropped it and it went off.

Roy bet on the old law-enforcement rule that what looks like an accident probably is an accident.

Pete didn't move. He thought he saw something funny in Doug's eyes, something mean and sarcastic. It reminded him of Mo's expression. Pete took one look at those eyes and he could see how much Doug hated him and how much he loved Mo.

"You want me to go first?" Pete asked. Not moving, wondering if he should just run.

"Sure," Doug said. "You go first. Then I'll hand the guns over to

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

you." His eyes said: You're not afraid of climbing over the fence, are you? You're not afraid to turn your back on me, are you?

Then Doug was looking around, too.

Looking for witnesses.

"Go on," Doug encouraged.

Pete—his hands shaking from fear now, not anger—started to climb. Thinking: This is it. He's going to shoot me. I left the motel too early! Doug and Mo must have kept talking and planned out how he was going to ask me down here and pretend to be all nice and then he'd shoot me.

Remembering it was Doug who suggested hunting.

But if I run, Pete thought, he'll chase me down and shoot me. Even if he shoots me in the back he'll just claim it's an accident.

Roy's lawyer argued to the jury that, yes, the men had met on the path and struggled, but Hank had fallen accidentally. He urged the jury that, at worst, Roy was guilty of negligent homicide.

He put his foot on the first rung of wire. Started up.

Second rung of wire . . .

Pete's heart was beating a million times a minute. He had to pause to wipe his palms.

He thought he heard a whisper, as if Doug were talking to himself.

He swung his leg over the top wire.

Then he heard the sound of a gun cocking.

And Doug said in a hoarse whisper, "You're dead."

Pete gasped.

Crack!

The short, snappy sound of the .22 filled the field.

Pete choked a cry and looked around, nearly falling off the fence.

"Damn," Doug muttered. He was aiming away from the fence, nodding toward a tree line. "Squirrel. Missed him by two inches."

"Squirrel," Pete repeated manically. "And you missed him."

"Two goddamn inches."

Hands shaking, Pete continued over the fence and climbed to the ground.

"You okay?" Doug asked. "You look a little funny."

"I'm fine," he said.

Fine, fine, fine . . .

Doug handed Pete the guns and started over the fence. Pete debated. Then he put his rifle on the ground and gripped Doug's gun tight. He walked to the fence so that he was right below Doug.

"Look," Doug said as he got to the top. He was straddling it, his right leg on one side of the fence, his left on the other. "Over there." He pointed nearby.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

There was a big gray lop-eared rabbit on his haunches only twenty feet away.

"There you go!" Doug whispered. "You've got a great shot."

Pete shouldered the gun. It was pointing at the ground, halfway between the rabbit and Doug.

"Go ahead. What're you waiting for?"

Roy was convicted of premeditated murder in the first degree and sentenced to life in prison. Yet he came very close to committing the perfect murder. If not for a simple twist of fate, he would have gotten away with it.

Pete looked at the rabbit, looked at Doug.

"Aren't you going to shoot?"

Uhm, okay, he thought.

Pete raised the gun and pulled the trigger once.

Doug gasped, pressed at the tiny bullet hole in his chest. "But . . . But . . . No!"

He fell backwards off the fence and lay on a patch of dried mud, completely still. The rabbit bounded through the grass, panicked by the sound of the shot, and disappeared in a tangle of bushes that Pete recognized as blackberries. Mo had planted tons of them in their backyard.

The plane descended from cruising altitude and slowly floated toward the airport.

Pete watched the billowy clouds, tried to figure out what they looked like. He was bored. He didn't have anything to read. Before he'd talked to the Maryland state troopers about Doug's death, he'd thrown the true-crime book about the Triangle murder into a trash bin.

One of the reasons the jury convicted Roy was that, upon examining his house, the police found several books about disposing of evidence. Roy had no satisfactory explanation for them.

The small plane glided out of the skies and landed at White Plains airport. Pete pulled his knapsack out from underneath the seat in front of him and climbed out of the plane. He walked down the ramp, beside the flight attendant, a tall black woman. They'd talked together for most of the flight.

Pete saw Mo at the gate. She looked numb. She wore sunglasses and Pete supposed she'd been crying. She was clutching a Kleenex in her fingers.

Her nails weren't bright red anymore, he noticed.

They weren't peach either.

They were just plain fingernail color.

The flight attendant came up to Mo. "You're Mrs. Jill Anderson?"

Mo nodded.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

The woman held up a sheet of paper. "Here. Could you sign this, please?"

Numbly Mo took the pen the woman offered and signed the paper.

It was an unaccompanied-minor form, which adults had to sign to allow their children to get on planes by themselves. The parent picking up the child also had to sign it. After his parents were divorced Pete flew back and forth between Wisconsin and White Plains so often he knew all about airlines' procedures for kids who flew alone.

"I have to say," she said to Mo, smiling down at Pete, "he's the best-behaved youngster I've ever had on one of my flights. How old are you, Pete?"

"I'm ten," he answered. "But I'm going to be eleven next week."

She squeezed his shoulder, then looked at Mo. "I'm so sorry about what happened," she said in a soft voice. "The trooper who put Pete on the plane told me. Your boyfriend was killed in a hunting accident?"

"No," Mo said, struggling to say the words, "he wasn't my boyfriend."

Though Pete was thinking: Of course he was your boyfriend. Except you didn't want the court to find that out because then Dad wouldn't have to pay you alimony anymore. Which is why she and Doug had been working so hard to convince Pete that Doug was "just a friend."

Can't I have friends? Aren't I allowed?

No, you're not, Pete thought. You're not going to get away with dumping me the way you dumped Dad.

"Can we go home, Mo?" he asked, looking as sad as he could. "I feel real funny about what happened."

"Sure, honey."

"Mo?" the flight attendant asked.

Mo, staring out the window, said, "When he was five Pete tried to write 'Mother' on my birthday card. He just wrote M-O and didn't know how to spell the rest. It became my nickname."

"What a sweet story," the woman said and looked like *she* was going to cry. "Pete, you come back and fly with us real soon."

"Okay."

"Hey, what're you going to do for your birthday?"

"I don't know," he said. Then he looked up at his mother. "I was thinking about maybe going hiking. In Colorado. Just the two of us." ●

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

NEXT ISSUE...

Saint Bobby
BY DOUG ALLYN

The Long Way Back
BY ED GORMAN

The Do-Gooder
BY CELIA FREMLIN

The Final Chance
BY DAVID WILLIAMS

ELLERY QUEEN'S MYSTERY MAGAZINE. Vol. 113, No. 3. Whole No. 690, March, 1999. Published monthly except for a combined September/October double issue by Dell Magazines, a division of Crosstown Publications. 1 year subscription $33.97 in U.S.A. and possessions, $41.97 elsewhere, payable in advance and in U.S. funds (GST included in Canada). Call 800-333-3053 with questions about your subscription. Subscription orders and mail regarding subscriptions should be sent to Ellery Queen, P.O. Box 54625, Boulder, CO 80322-4625. Editorial and Executive Offices, 475 Park Avenue South, New York, N.Y. 10016. Periodical postage paid at New York, N.Y. and at additional mailing offices. Canadian postage paid at Windsor, Ontario. Canada Post International Publications Mail, Product Sales Agreement No. 260649. © 1999 Dell Magazines, a division of Crosstown Publications, all rights reserved. Protection secured under the Universal Copyright Convention and the Pan American Copyright convention. ELLERY QUEEN'S MYSTERY MAGAZINE® is the registered trademark of Ellery Queen. Submissions must be accompanied by self-addressed stamped envelope. The publisher assumes no responsibility for unsolicited manuscripts. POSTMASTER: Send Change of Address to Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine, P.O. Box 54625, Boulder, CO 80328-4625. In Canada return to 3255 Wyandotte Street East, Windsor, Ontario N8Y 1E9. USPS 523-610, ISSN 1054-8122. Dell GST: R123054108. For back issues, send your check for $5.00 (U.S. funds) to Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine, Suite SM-100, 6 Prowitt Street, Norwalk, CT 06855-1220. Please specify the issue you are ordering. Add $2 per copy for delivery outside the U.S.

PRINTED IN CANADA

PRINTED WITH SOY INK

JANET HUTCHINGS
Editor

BRENT BAGWELL
Editorial Assistant

SUSAN KENDRIOSKI
Executive Director,
Art & Production

VICTORIA GREEN
Senior Art Director

SHIRLEY CHAN LEVI
Assistant Art Director

CAROLE DIXON
Production Manager

ABIGAIL BROWNING
Manager, Subsidiary Rights
& Marketing

BRUCE W. SHERBOW
Director of Newsstand Sales

SANDY MARLOWE
Circulation Services

JULIA McEVOY
Manager, Advertising Sales

PETER KANTER
Publisher

ELLERY QUEEN
Editor-in-Chief 1941-1982

ELEANOR SULLIVAN
Editor-in-Chief 1982-1991

ADVERTISING REPRESENTATIVE
DAVID GELLER PUBLISHER'S REP
(212) 682-1540
(Display Advertising)

RUSSELL JOHNS ASSOCIATES
(800) 237-9851
(Classified Advertising)

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

CLASSIFIED MARKETPLACE

Advertise to the World's largest mystery magazine audience with our Ellery Queen/Alfred Hitchcock combined classified section. Ad Rates per issue: $4.95 per word (10 word minimum), $350 per column inch (2.25 inch maximum). SPECIAL INTRODUCTORY OFFER: Buy two issues and receive a third issue FREE. Send orders to: Dell Magazines, Classified Department, P.O. Box 1510, Clearwater, FL 33757-1510. Direct inquires to: (800) 237-9851; Fax (727) 445-9380.

AUTHORS

AGENT SEEKING AUTHORS SASE: Deb GEM, 4717 Poe Road, Medina, OH 44256. www.gembooks.com

ATTENTION AUTHORS. Established publisher with international offices can arrange the editing, publication, promotion, warehousing, and distribution of your book. Pentland Press, Dept. EQ. (800) 948-2786.

ASTROLOGY

EMPOWER YOURSELF through Earth's religion. Free Protective Pentacle. The School of Wicca, P.O. Box 297 AN, Hinton, WV 25951-0297.

BOOKS AND PERIODICALS

FREE CATALOG Collectible and used mystery books. Dunn and Powell Books, Dept. DP, The Hideaway, Bar Harbor, ME 04609-1714, dpbooks@acadia.net/www.dpbooks.com

FREE CATALOGS Collectible/used mysteries. Murder is Served, 5273 Bittersweet Drive, Dayton, OH 45429. (937) 438-0211.

FREE LISTS. Quality used paperbacks: mysteries, SF, gothics, westerns. (Please specify.) Steve Lewis, 62 Chestnut, Newington, CT 06111.

BOOKS AND PERIODICALS

SEND FOR FREE catalog of mystery and detective fiction. Canford Books, Drawer 216E, Freeville, NY 13068.

MISCELLANEOUS

www.jamesbond.org Online mystery magazine visits & submissions welcome.

PATENTING

INVENTORS: Apply for a Patent! FREE Information Kit. Call (800) 846-8368, Ext. 404.

VIDEOS/DVD

HITCHCOCK AND HUNDREDS of movie classics, videotapes $4.99, for free catalog: www.madacyvideo.com (800) 991-8766; KC Sales, 31312 ViaColinas, #102, Westlake Village, CA 91362, credit card/check.

WORK AT HOME

GET PAID $500 WEEK AND UP. No hype just big weekly checks. In less than 2 weeks, you could have your first check in the mail. Call for details, (800) 811-2141, passcode 61975.

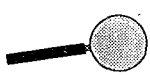
FREE AD OFFER IN OUR MYSTERY COMBO

TAKE ADVANTAGE OF PLACING A CLASSIFIED AD IN OUR NEXT TWO ISSUES AND RECEIVE A THIRD AD FREE!

Your ad will reach a combined audience of 300,000 readers in our outstanding publications – ELLERY QUEEN and ALFRED HITCHCOCK'S Mystery Magazines. Call today for a new rate card.

Dell Magazines • Classified Department • P.O. Box 1510 • Clearwater, FL 33757-1510

Call: (800) 237-9851 • FAX: (727) 445-9380

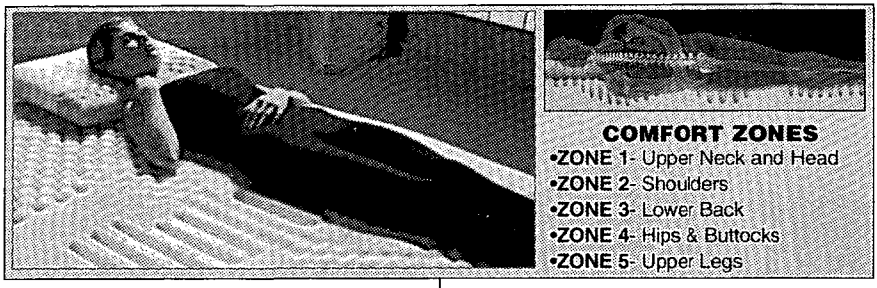


LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

TECHNOLOGY UPDATE

"For years I had trouble sleeping restfully—now I know the problem was in my mattress!"

NatureSleep™ Platinum features comfort zones that match your body's shape and promote restful, therapeutic sleep.



Traditional mattresses leave your lower back and legs unsupported and hinder proper circulation. Even expensive waterbeds, which are supposed to distribute weight evenly, fail to support the body properly. Your spine arches downward, in a position specialists refer to as "hammocking," causing excessive strain on the back. Scientists and doctors agree that the ideal position is a neutral body posture which the different parts of the human body are supported individually and evenly. This is the secret behind NatureSleep Platinum, the revolutionary product that turns any bed into the ideal sleep surface.

Scientific solution. Anatomic Concepts, a medical products research and manufacturing company, has designed the ultimate mattress pad. Using research originally conducted for hospitals, this innovative company developed an effective, affordable way to transform any mattress into a specially-designed sleep surface that closely matches the shape of the human body. It features a patented five-zone sleep surface that holds the body in a neutral posture and redistributes pressure during sleep.

Comfort zones. The distinct comfort zones in NatureSleep Platinum have revolutionized the sleep-product industry. They reduce sleep stress—especially strain on the spine—and cradle those areas of the body prone to increased pressure. Until now, only the most expensive and most advanced mattress products featured this degree of technology, but now you can get it without even buying a new mattress.

The distinct comfort zones in NatureSleep Platinum have revolutionized the sleep-product industry. They reduce sleep stress—especially strain on the spine—and cradle those areas of the body prone to increased pressure.

Installs in seconds. NatureSleep Platinum fits right over your existing mattress, uses normal sheets and turns any bed into an anatomically-correct and incredibly comfortable sleep surface. The five comfort zones have been created using a computer-designed grid pattern and are engineered to accommodate people of all heights and sizes.

Risk-free. Try it for yourself, it comes with a one-year manufacturer's limited warranty and Comtrad's exclusive risk-free home trial. If for any reason you are not completely satisfied, return your purchase within 90 days for a full refund, "No Questions Asked."

NatureSleep™ Platinum:

Twin	**$59.95**	$8 S&H
Double	**$89.95**	$10 S&H
Queen	**$99.95**	$12 S&H
King	**$119.95**	$14 S&H

Please mention promotional code 3494-14707

For fastest service, call toll-free 24 hours a day

800-992-2966

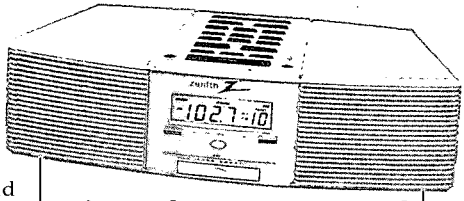
comtrad industries

2820 Waterford Lake Dr., Suite 102
Midlothian, Virginia 23113

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Big sound from a stereo radio—without the big price!

Zenith Audio, a leading electronics manufacturer designs a "Small Footprint," "Big Sound" stereo system and drives the price below $100.



Micro-Electronic Sound Breakthrough

State of the art stereo sound quality in a stylish cabinet

- **AM/FM/TV Bands**
- **Stereo Speakers with Crystal Sound System**
- **Digital Weather Band**
- **37 Preset Station Memories**
- **Ascending Tone Alarm**
- **Wake/Sleep to Radio, Weather or TV Band**
- **"Fail-safe" Alarm System**

Zenith Audio has developed a Digital Stereo Clock Radio that boasts the acoustic quality and practical features of stereo radios four times as expensive. You'll be amazed at the sound quality and powerful bass you get from a radio this small and this affordable. This stereo radio features an 11-key handheld remote control and an input jack for CD players or other audio sources.

Loaded with features. The AM/FM radio features digital tuning for pinpoint reception and crystal-clear sound. The STEREO indicator allows you to tune in to the stereo signal. It also picks up TV and WEATHER signals with 13 TV channels and 7 Weather channels, so your Zenith Audio Clock Radio is a great source of news, entertainment and information. You can program the unit's memory for 37 preset stations, and the tuning buttons can operate either manually or in a automatic search mode.

Practical functions. The backlit clock has several alarm functions, so you can wake to either radio, TV, weather or a buzzer. The sleep timer allows you to fall asleep to up to 90 minutes of music, TV or weather and then shuts off automatically. In the morning, if you need a few extra minutes of sleep, press the SNOOZE bar on the control panel or on the remote. The radio or alarm tone stops for 10 minutes and then sounds again. The unit's battery backup system will maintain the time, alarm and preset station memories in the event of a temporary power interruption.

Factory direct risk-free offer. You can spend hundreds of dollars more on a stereo radio, but why do it? We get the Stereo Clock Radio direct from Zenith and pass the savings on to you. This product comes with a one-year manufacturer's limited warranty and Comtrad's exclusive risk-free home trial. If you are not satisfied for any reason, simply return it within 90 days for a full "No Questions Asked" refund.

Zenith Crystal Clear Stereo. .$99.95 $12 S&H
Please specify white or black.

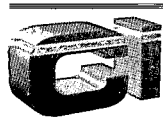
Please mention promotional code **4242-14706.**

For fastest service, call toll-free 24 hours a day

800-992-2966

DISCOVER NOVUS VISA MasterCard American Express Card

To order by mail, send check or money order for the total amount including S&H. To charge it to your credit card, enclose your account number and expiration date.
Virginia residents only—please include 4.5% sales tax.



comtrad industries
2820 Waterford Lake Dr., Suite 102
Midlothian, Virginia 23112

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED